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Teaching and assessing oral skills in the advent of oral language testing in the Finnish Matriculation Examination

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Tiivistelmä – Referat – Abstract <p>Jo vuosikymmeniä jatkunut keskustelu kielten suullisen osakokeen lisäämisestä ylioppilastutkintoon sai uusia kierroksia keväällä 2017, kun opetus- ja kulttuuriministeriö ilmoitti ylioppilastutkintolautakunnan käynnistäneen suullisen kielitaidon osakokeen kehittämisen. Tässä tutkielmassa kartoitettiin lukion englannin kielen opettajien näkemyksiä suullisen kielitaidon opetuksesta ja arvioinnista sekä tulevasta suullisen kielitaidon osakokeesta englannin ylioppilaskokeessa. Tutkielma toteutettiin verkkopohjaisena kyselytutkimuksena, johon osallistui yhteensä 85 lukion englannin kielen opettajaa ympäri Suomea. Tutkielmassa etsittiin vastauksia seuraaviin kysymyksiin:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Miten lukion englannin kielen opettajat opettavat ja arvioivat suullista kielitaitoa?2. Miten he arvioivat tämänhetkisen tietämyksensä suullisen kielitaidon opetuksesta ja arvioinnista?3. Miten he uskovat suullisen kielitaidon osakokeen vaikuttavan opetus- ja arviointikäytänteisiin? <p>Tutkielman tulokset osoittavat, että lukion englannin kielen opettajat suhtautuvat positiivisesti suullisen kielitaidon opetukseen ja arviointiin, mutta ajanpuute, suuret ryhmäkoot ja opiskelijoiden motivaation puute tekevät siitä haasteellista. Myös opetussuunnitelman suullisen kielitaidon arviointikriteerejä pidetään liian epämääräisinä. Ottaen huomioon ylioppilastutkinnon takaistusvaikutuksen lukio-opetukseen, suullisen osakokeen käyttöönotolla on mitä todennäköisimmin positiivisia vaikutuksia suullisen kielitaidon opetukseen ja arviointiin. Opettajat kannattavatkin suullisen osakokeen lisäämistä englannin ylioppilaskokeeseen, joskin sen käytännön toteutus herättää epäluuloa. Kokelaiden suuri määrä, opettajien työmäärän lisääntyminen ilman riittävää korvausta, autenttisen vuorovaikutuksen puute testitilanteessa, arvioinnin käytännön toteutuksen haasteet sekä kokeen kuormittavuus opiskelijoiden näkökulmasta herättävät huolta opettajissa. Suullisen kielitaidon opetuksen, testaamisen ja arvioinnin täydennyskoulutukselle näyttäisi olevan tarvetta, ja opettajien täydennyskoulutusta voidaankin pitää suullisen osakokeen onnistumisen kannalta ensisijaisen tärkeänä.</p>		
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1 INTRODUCTION

The human brain is wired to speak. The fact that we say that somebody *speaks* a language instead of *reading*, *writing* or *listening* to it implies that speaking is at the core of all human communication. In Finnish upper secondary schools language instruction is based on a broad text definition, which encompasses both written and spoken language (National core curriculum 2015: 142). Previous research shows that even though both teachers and students consider practicing oral skills important, big group sizes, lack of time and students' lack of motivation make it difficult (see e.g. Ahola-Houtsonen 2013; Huuskonen & Kähkönen 2006; Tattari 2001). Fingers have pointed at the Matriculation Examination, a national high-stakes examination, which serves as the hidden curriculum of Finnish upper secondary schools. The examination is still lacking a speaking test, which causes a strong negative washback effect on the teaching and learning of oral skills in upper secondary schools (see e.g. Mäkelä 2005; Yli-Renko 1991). What may become a major turning point for the existing situation, however, is the ongoing digitalization process of the examination and a consequent introduction of a computer-assisted oral language test. According to the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture (2017a: 53), the first oral tests could be arranged in 2022 at the earliest.

The purpose of the present study is to identify upper secondary school teachers' views on the teaching and assessment of oral language skills and on the upcoming testing of oral language skills in the Matriculation Examination for English. The mixed-method study was conducted in February 2018 as an online survey, whose target group consisted of upper secondary school teachers of English from Finland. The research questions are:

1. How do upper secondary school teachers of English teach and assess oral language skills in Finland?
2. How do they evaluate their current knowledge of oral language teaching and assessment?
3. How do they think the testing of oral language skills in the Matriculation Examination will affect their teaching and assessment practices?

In line with previous research, Finnish upper secondary school teachers of English are highly supportive of the teaching and assessment of oral skills, but big group sizes, lack of time, and students' lack of motivation make it challenging. Especially assessing turns out to be problematic; the assessment criteria for oral skills set in the national core curriculum are not as clear as they could be. Considering the role of the Matriculation Examination as the hidden curriculum of Finnish upper secondary education, including an oral test in the examination might well be a viable solution for most of the challenges associated with the teaching and assessment of oral skills. The teachers support the idea of including an oral test in the Matriculation Examination for English, even though they are skeptical about its implementation; the large number of candidates, increasing workload without sufficient recompense, lack of authentic interaction in the test, implementation of the assessment, and increasing stress among the candidates are among the most common concerns. There seems to be a need for continuing training on teaching, testing and assessing oral skills, and particularly on testing and assessing them. Providing enough continuing training opportunities for the teachers should be an integral part of the planning and implementation process of the future oral test.

This paper is organized as follows. Chapter 2 discusses the theoretical background of the study. The material and methods are described in chapter 3. The results are presented in chapter 4 and discussed in more detail in chapter 5 along with the limitations of the study and considerations for future research. Finally, chapter 6 concludes the study.

2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

This chapter is divided into two subsections. Section 2.1 deals with communicative oral proficiency and its subcategories speech communication and oral language skills. Additionally, written and oral language modes will be compared briefly before moving on to section 2.2, which deals with the testing and assessment of oral skills. I will begin by looking into Finnish upper secondary education and how the English studies are integrated in it. I will then move on to discuss the Finnish Matriculation Examination and the concepts of washback and computer-assisted language testing (CALT), which are closely related to the examination. Finally, the current situation of teaching, testing, and assessing oral skills in Finnish upper secondary schools will be examined in order to justify the present study.

2.1 Communicative oral proficiency

2.1.1 Language proficiency and communicative competence

Today, language proficiency is essentially seen as the ability to use language in communicative situations. Communicative competence has been the main objective of foreign language teaching since the early 1970s (Mäkelä 2005: 11). The term *competence* was first introduced by Chomsky (1965). He distinguished *performance*, which was the use of language in real life situations and *competence*, which referred to knowledge of language and its structures. Hymes (1972) further developed Chomsky's ideas and coined the term *communicative competence*, which encompassed both grammatical knowledge of language and the ability to use the language in social interactions. Even though Chomsky's and Hyme's models were created to explain first language knowledge and use, they became an important stepping stone for later frameworks. In the early 1980s, Canale and Swain (1980) introduced a model that was developed for second language teaching and assessment purposes and greatly affected the present understanding of communicative competence. In this model communicative competence was divided into three different competences: *grammatical competence*, *sociolinguistic competence*, and

strategic competence. Grammatical competence includes knowledge of the linguistic code, such as lexical items and rules of phonology, morphology, syntax and semantics. Sociolinguistic competence refers to knowledge of sociocultural rules of discourse, i.e. how to use language appropriately in a given cultural setting. Finally, strategic competence refers to the ability to overcome difficulties and compensate for a lack of language knowledge in a communicative situation. At the same time with Canale and Swain, Bachman and Palmer (1996) began to develop their model of communicative competence for testing purposes. It was largely based on Canale and Swain's model, but included more detailed information about personal and test-related characteristics that affect an individual's test performance. A more recent model of communicative competence is introduced in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). The action-oriented approach adopted in the Framework (CEFR 2001: 9) views users and learners of a language as 'social agents' who use their general and communicative language competences in language activities. They use various strategies that seem the most appropriate for carrying out tasks and produce texts in relation to themes in specific domains. These actions are then monitored by the participants, which leads to the reinforcement or modification of their competences.

This study is based on the model presented in the Common European Framework for languages (CEFR) as it has been widely accepted as the European standard for assessing foreign language learners' language proficiency in Europe, including Finland. The evolving language proficiency scales of the Finnish national core curriculum for general upper secondary schools (2015) are, in fact, based on the CEFR and its language proficiency rating scales. It is worth mentioning that in 2017 the Council of Europe published an additional companion volume to the CEFR in order to update and extend the existing CEFR scales (see CEFR 2018).

2.1.2 Speech communication and oral language skills

The models of communicative competence presented above have one thing in common: language competence encompasses both knowledge of language and the ability to use that language in communicative situations. According to Hildén (2000:

172), all communicative language functions are, in one way or another, speech communication. Speech communication is interaction between two interlocutors who are in connection with each other, often simultaneously but not necessarily. Speech communication skills consist of linguistic skills (grammatical and phonetic skills), functional skills (pragmatic and sociolinguistic skills), and strategic skills (the ability to control and plan the interaction process and make use of one's competences in order to achieve the communicative goal) (ibid.).

Oral language skills are part of speech communication skills (Hildén 2000: 173). They refer to the knowledge and skills needed in communicative language functions, in which spoken language is used to interact or transmit information in the target language. Oral language skills are language specific (e.g. English oral language skills) and one can have oral skills in several languages. Practice of oral skills in any language improves speech communication skills as a whole (ibid.).

2.1.3 Spoken language vs. written language

Spoken and written language are often erroneously treated as identical, even though a closer scrutiny of the two language modes reveals that they are more different than one might expect. Spontaneity, reciprocity and context-specific nature make spoken language different from written language, where users have more time to plan, edit and correct the outcome. Spoken language is essentially spoken interaction, which means that simple utterances that can be handled within the time constraints of the speaking situation and the interlocutors' working memory are favored over lengthy, multi-layered structures. In fact, speakers do not usually speak in sentences, but in what Chafe (1982) calls *idea units*. They are short, typically two seconds or seven words long, sometimes incomplete phrases and clauses, which are grammatically simpler than written sentences. Additionally, the vocabulary and fixed expressions, such as *I thought you'd never ask*, are usually simpler in spoken interaction, which makes communication quick and easy. Generic words such as *this one* or *that one* may not be precise, but they are fully comprehensible in the speaking situation where smoothly flowing communication is more important than the use of specific, accurate terminology. Idea units are typically surrounded by fillers and hesitation markers

such as *well, kind of, you know* or even whole expressions such as *That's a good question* to create time to speak. Luoma (2004: 18) suggests that the successful use of such expressions indicates good oral skills and should not be counted as errors in speaking tests. In fact, it is the quality of errors that dictates whether they can be counted as errors in the first place. For instance, mispronounced words, mixed sounds and wrong words due to inattention are typical for all speakers and, therefore, part of natural speech, whereas violating basic word order rules are only typical for language learners (Luoma 2004: 19). In addition to occasional language slips, time constraints and memory limitations make corrections in speech downright necessary (Bygate 1987: 18–19). Often speakers need time to process what they hear and ask for further clarification if some information is missing. The structure of speech can be considered as what Bygate (1987: 19) terms “short bursts of language [moving] back and forth between the speakers”, in which new and old information are exchanged and repeated if necessary.

Written form of communication has long been treated as the primary and preferable form of communication that the oral mode should imitate in order to be considered valid and intelligible (Lakoff 1982: 240). When writing overtook oral modes of literature a couple of millenia ago, literacy became synonymous with culture and progress. However, as Lakoff (ibid.) goes on to suggest, this position is slowly being changed; for the past decades, rapid improvements in information-processing and audiovisual technology have brought at our disposal both the immediacy and heartfelnness of the oral mode and the reliability and preservability of the written mode. Implementing an oral test in the Matriculation Examination and, thus, placing the two language modes on a genuinely equal footing with each other would be a proof that foreign language instruction in Finland is involved in this change.

2.2 Testing and assessing oral proficiency

As Cheng, Watanabe and Curtis (2004: xiii) put it, we live in a testing world. The Finnish education system and the labor market are filled with – if not based on – testing and ranking individuals according to their skills and personal characteristics. In the present study *testing* is understood as measuring someone's proficiency or

knowledge by means of a test. *Assessment* is a more comprehensive term, which refers to the process of evaluating proficiency or knowledge. Usually assessment involves a test of some sort. In other words, testing is a form of assessment, a tool used to assess proficiency.

It is tempting to assume that assessing speaking reliably is difficult, and not least because language testing as a whole can be considered a complex activity. According to Alderson and Bachman (2004: x), assessment does not only depend on which particular features of speech (e.g. pronunciation, accuracy, fluency) the interlocutor decides to pay attention to, but on a range of other factors. These factors would be the language level, gender, the status of the interlocutor, his or her familiarity to the candidate, and the personal characteristics of both the interlocutor and candidate. Moreover, the nature of the interaction between the two, and the tasks including the topics and the questions asked affect the candidate's performance. Finally, the criteria used to assess speaking and the way in which the interlocutor interprets them can vary tremendously. There are several ways to address these problems: careful construction of the tasks, training of both interlocutors and assessors, and audio or video recording of test performances for further analysis are all realizable tools to enhance the reliability of the assessment (ibid.).

2.2.1 Finnish upper secondary school and the Matriculation Examination

After the nine-year basic education in comprehensive school, students in Finland may opt for academically oriented general upper secondary education. By the end of the upper secondary studies virtually all students take the national high-stakes examination, the Matriculation Examination, which constitutes the final exams and qualifies for tertiary education. In order to receive the Matriculation Examination certificate, the student must pass at least four exams. Only the test in the candidate's mother tongue is obligatory, the rest can be chosen from among the following: the second national language, a foreign language, mathematics, and a test in the humanities and natural sciences (Ylioppilastutkintolautakunta 2018: 2). Today, the Matriculation Examination for English consists of two parts: a listening comprehension test and a test of written comprehension and production. Upper

secondary school teachers perform a preliminary assessment before the tests are sent to the Matriculation Examination Board, where the censors make the final assessment and decide on the grades. Currently the examination is under a process of digitalization, and it is estimated to become fully digital by spring 2019 (Opetus- ja kulttuuriministeriö 2017a: 49). The first digital exam for English was held in Spring 2018.

The Finnish National Board of Education is responsible for the national core curricula for general upper secondary schools, which define the core contents and objectives for each subject, including foreign languages. In the latest curriculum (2015: 146) the teaching of English as an A-language, a language starting in grades 1–6 of basic education (long syllabus), is guided by the following objectives of instruction:

”the student:

- develops as a user of English and an actor in the culturally diverse world in local, national, European, and global communities
- understands the significance and role of English as the language of international communication
- is able to assess the sufficiency of his or her proficiency from the viewpoint of further studies
- is able to plan his or her language studies for his or her future needs from the perspectives of working life and internationalisation
- gathers experiences of reading, interpreting and discussing more extensive texts in English
- is able to relate his or her competence with the B2.1 level of the Evolving Language Proficiency Scale, assess the development of his or her knowledge and skills, and further develop these.”

Currently there are eight English courses, which can be further divided into six obligatory courses and two optional courses. In 2010 the other optional course (ENA8) was changed into a speaking course, which includes a speaking test at the end of the course. By the end of the upper secondary studies the students should achieve level B2.1 in interacting, interpreting and producing both written and spoken

texts. As already mentioned above, the levels used to describe language proficiency in the national core curriculum are based on the language proficiency rating scales of the CEFR (2001).

2.2.2 Washback in language testing

Assessment is essentially a social practice, which serves institutional purposes, such as educational objectives set in curricula (McNamara 2000: 68). Finnish upper secondary school teachers and censors of the Matriculation Examination Board hold a considerable amount of social responsibility, since their assessment practices have a major impact on the candidate's future. *Washback*, a term commonly adopted in the field of applied linguistics, refers to the influence of testing on language teaching and learning (Cheng and Curtis 2004: 3). The concept behind the term is based on the notion that language testing should drive teaching and learning (ibid. 2004: 4). This is called ethical language testing practice, which involves the idea of test developers taking responsibility for the effects of testing (McNamara 2000: 72). Washback, which itself is a neutral term, may be positive or negative depending on its effect on teaching and learning. Positive washback promotes educational goals, whereas negative washback causes undesirable effects on them. The Finnish Matriculation Examination can be considered to have a strong negative washback effect on language teaching and learning, since it does not include a speaking test. Fortunately, this has already been taken into serious consideration, and it is estimated that the first speaking tests could be arranged in 2022 at the earliest (Opetus- ja kulttuuriministeriö 2017a: 53).

The teacher is often considered to have a central role in determining whether washback occurs, how and to what extent. Alderson (2003: xi) suggests that the future research should pay more attention to teachers, because there is only so much test developers can do about the degree of washback. After all, it is the teacher who prepares the students for the test and makes the ultimate decisions on the contents, materials and methods of teaching. Teachers' beliefs and attitudes, their educational level, teaching experience, and personalities should be the main factors of interest.

The present study, whose focus is on the teachers and their perceptions, seeks to fill this gap.

2.2.3 Computer-assisted language testing (CALT)

Rapid technological advances in the past several decades have revolutionized human life, language education being no exception. Computer-assisted language testing (CALT) refers to the use of computer applications to evaluate different language skills of non-native speakers. Chapelle (2010) names three main motives for using technology in language testing: efficiency, equivalence and innovation. By efficiency she refers to the objective of making language testing more cost and time efficient. Equivalence is achieved when computerized tests are equivalent to paper and pencil tests, which are the so-called “gold standard” of language testing. Finally, innovation refers to the potential of technology to transform language testing; “whether technology has really changed what can and should be tested, and how that can be done” (Chapelle 2010).

CALT is gradually replacing the traditional paper and pencil testing in the Finnish Matriculation Examination. According to the Finnish Ministry of Culture and Education (2017a: 52), the new oral test will be based on the findings of DigiTala, an interdisciplinary research project that aims to develop a computer-assisted oral language test that would be part of language tests at the end of upper secondary education. In the project students perform web-based oral tasks that include reading a text, providing short responses to questions, describing pictures, and expressing their opinion on a given topic. The test performances are both audio and video recorded. Automated preliminary assessment produces transcriptions of the spoken texts, statistical data, and recommendations for the assessment based on the phonetic characteristics of the test performances (ibid.).

The decision to use automated evaluation systems in conjunction with human raters in high-stakes examinations, such as the Finnish Matriculation Examination, is understandable. After all, automated evaluation systems cannot yet evaluate coherence, content and logic at the level of human raters (Suvorov and Hegelheimer 2013: 16). However, CALT is a fast-growing field of research. In terms of computer-

based assessment of speaking, automatic speech recognition and emotion recognition systems that use facial expressions, voice tone and gestures to identify emotions from speech (see Schuller et al. 2009) might well be reality in a few decades. According to Suvorov and Hegelheimer (2013: 17), the advent of the third generation web, the Semantic Web, might even bring computers that will act both as raters and as interlocutors by generating test items automatically based on students' responses and adapting them to their performances. The first computer-assisted oral tests of the Matriculation Examination might well be considered the first stepping stone to the future of language testing in Finland.

2.2.4 Teaching, testing, and assessing oral skills in Finnish upper secondary schools: the present situation

The importance of teaching and assessing oral skills was recognized in Finland in the 1970s as the communicative movement redirected the focus on written language to communicative (oral) language use. Today, the importance of practising both written and oral language skills is well acknowledged in the national core curriculum (2015), but the reality is rather different. Previous research indicates that even though both teachers and students consider practicing oral skills important, big group sizes and lack of time and resources make it difficult (see e.g. Ahola-Houtsonen 2013; Huuskonen & Kähkönen 2006; Tattari 2001). Moreover, the Finnish Matriculation Examination is still lacking a speaking test, which causes a strong negative washback effect on practicing oral skills in upper secondary schools (see e.g. Mäkelä 2005; Yli-Renko 1991). The teachers are already pressured to prepare their students for the national high-stakes examination, even more so now that the grades achieved from the tests will become even more important in applying for higher education studies (Opetus- ja kulttuuriministeriö 2017b). It is only natural that the teachers dedicate most of their time to teaching reading, writing, listening and grammar – skills that are actually tested in the Matriculation Examination. Therefore, it can be concluded that the examination serves as the hidden curriculum of Finnish upper secondary schools. Additionally, it is in striking contrast with the national core curriculum, which emphasizes the practice of both oral and written language.

Despite the obvious contradiction between the Matriculation Examination and the national core curriculum, the discussion about adding a speaking test into the examination has already continued for decades. According to Saleva (1993: 8), it was first mentioned in 1958 at a meeting of the newly founded Federation of Foreign Language Teachers in Finland (SUKOL). At the time the teachers considered oral skills important, but were against adding an oral test into the Matriculation Examination. Later in 1988 and 2006 the Ministry of Education (now Ministry of Education and Culture) set working groups to examine how an oral test could be implemented in the Matriculation Examination (see Lukiokoulutuksen suullisen kielitaidon arviointityöryhmän muistio 2006: 8; Opetus- ja kulttuuriministeriö 2017a: 51). On both occasions it was concluded that testing oral skills was not possible. Currently the examination is being gradually digitalized, which has become an important turning point for the debate; the digitalization of the tests makes computer-assisted oral language testing finally possible. According to Huuskonen & Kähkönen (2006: 63), the costs of speaking tests might be one of the reasons why they have not been included in the examination before, since training and retraining assessors is expensive. Digitalization cuts the costs as the test and part of its assessment would be done by computer (Opetus- ja kulttuuriministeriö 2017a: 52). According to the Ministry of Education and Culture (2017a: 53), the first speaking tests could be arranged in 2022 at the earliest.

Teaching, testing, and assessing oral skills in the Finnish upper secondary school have been a popular source of research (see e.g. Ahola-Houtsonen 2013; Huuskonen & Kähkönen 2006; Mäkelä 2005; Tattari 2001; Yli-Renko 1991, 1989; Takala 1977). In her study Yli-Renko (1989) developed an oral proficiency test for third-year upper secondary school students of German, which included an interview, role play and picture description. The results of the study were promising, and Yli-Renko suggested that the test could be used as part of the Matriculation Examination in order to promote a more positive washback effect of the examination. Later Yli-Renko (1991) studied oral language learning from upper secondary school students' point of view and reported that the students did not receive enough oral practice due to big group sizes, the emphasis on language structures, and the negative washback effect of the written Matriculation Examination. In his doctoral dissertation about oral English practice in the Finnish upper secondary school Mäkelä (2005) arrived at

a similar conclusion: the students wished to receive more oral fluency practice. Interestingly, in his study there were some contradictions between the teachers' and students' views, since the teachers reported that the students practice oral skills frequently. Huuskonen and Kähkönen's (2006) study resembles the present study in that they examined how oral skills are practiced, tested and assessed in the Finnish upper secondary school from the teachers' point of view. The teachers considered practicing oral skills in upper secondary school important, but were not that supportive of oral language testing.

What the abovementioned studies have in common is that they all support the implementation of an oral test in the Matriculation Examination in order to promote a more positive washback effect on the teaching and learning of oral skills in Finnish upper secondary schools. However, the ongoing digitalization of the Matriculation Examination has created yet another dimension to the debate and largely motivated the present study. In addition to finding out how upper secondary school teachers of English teach and assess oral skills, this study aims to explore their views on the upcoming computer-assisted testing of oral skills in the Matriculation Examination and its possible effects on their teaching and assessment practices. Additionally, the study sets out to explore how they evaluate their present knowledge and skills of oral language teaching and assessment, and whether they feel the need for continuing training in terms of teaching, testing and assessing oral skills in upper secondary school.

3 MATERIAL AND METHODS

The purpose of the present study is to identify upper secondary school teachers' views on the assessment of oral language skills and on the upcoming testing of oral language skills in the Matriculation Examination for English. The research questions are:

1. How do upper secondary school teachers of English teach and assess oral language skills in Finland?
2. How do they evaluate their current knowledge of oral language teaching and assessment?
3. How do they think the testing of oral language skills in the Matriculation Examination will affect their teaching and assessment practices?

The study was conducted as an online survey, whose target group consisted of upper secondary school teachers of English from Finland. The data was collected in February 2018 using E-lomake, a browser-based questionnaire application. Considering the large size of the population, an online survey was deemed the most cost and time efficient data collection method. Open-ended items were included to give a better insight into the teachers' thoughts that a quantitative study alone would not be able to provide. The survey was conducted in Finnish in order to enhance the teachers' willingness to speak their minds and give as honest and elaborate open-ended responses as possible.

Originally, an invitation to the study was supposed to be sent to a mailing list administered by SUKOL, which would have reached hundreds of English teachers from Finland. However, sending the invitation to the mailing list was not then possible, and alternative channels to contact teachers had to be taken into consideration. As a result, the first invitations to the study were published on the official Facebook pages of the Federation of Foreign Language Teachers in Finland (SUKOL) and the Association of Teachers of English in Finland (*Suomen Englanninopettajat ry*), as well as on two unofficial pages aimed at teachers of English in Finland (*Englannin opetus*) and upper secondary school teachers of English in Finland (*Englannin opettajat lukiossa*). In addition to the Facebook

invitations, teachers were contacted individually via e-mail. In order to maximize the representativeness of the sample, the schools were chosen randomly from a list of upper secondary schools operating in Finland. The schools were chosen at three different phases so that every fourth, sixth and eighth school on the list was contacted. If a school had already been chosen at a previous phase, it was skipped and the next school on the list was contacted instead. The teachers' contact information were collected from the schools' official webpages. As a result, a total of 168 upper secondary schools and approximately 425 teachers were contacted via e-mail.

The questionnaire was divided into two parts. The first part consisted of four preliminary questions that were later used to draw an overview of the respondents. The actual survey consisted of one open-ended item where the teachers would have to indicate the average number of students in an English class, a total of 13 likert scale and multiple choice questions and 12 optional open-ended items for questions 3–14 where teachers could elaborate on their responses. Lastly, optional open-ended item 15 could be used for any additional comments related to the study or the survey itself. Responding to the survey was completely anonymous, and the responses discussed in the following sections cannot be traced back to an individual respondent.

A total of 85 teachers participated in the study. The response rate is relatively good given that the data collection overlapped with the winter holiday season. Moreover, the teachers must have been busy preparing their students for the first digital exam for English, which was held on March 16. I believe the number of participants is representative enough to make generalizations about the population as a whole.

The mixed-method study involved both quantitative statistical analysis of the likert scale and multiple choice questions and qualitative content analysis of the open-ended data. The responses for each open-ended item (3–15) were compared with each other in order to detect similarities between them. Similar contents were then color coded and assigned a tag. For instance, all the responses or parts of responses that dealt with lack of time were highlighted with the same color and tagged as 'lack of time' for further analysis.

4 RESULTS

The results are divided into two subsections. Section 4.1 provides an overview of the respondents. In section 4.2 the actual results of the study are examined as follows:

- 4.2.1–4.2.4: How do Finnish upper secondary school teachers teach and assess oral language skills?
- 4.2.5–4.2.8: How do they evaluate their current knowledge of oral language teaching and assessment?
- 4.2.9: How do they think the testing of oral language skills in the Matriculation Examination will affect their teaching and assessment practices?
- 4.2.10: Additional comments

All the survey items are translated into English since the original survey was conducted in Finnish (Appendix A). The original Finnish data examples (1–62) are attached as Appendix B. One teacher responded in English and his or her responses have been included as such. The results are analyzed in more detail in chapter 5.

4.1 Basic information

4.1.1 Age

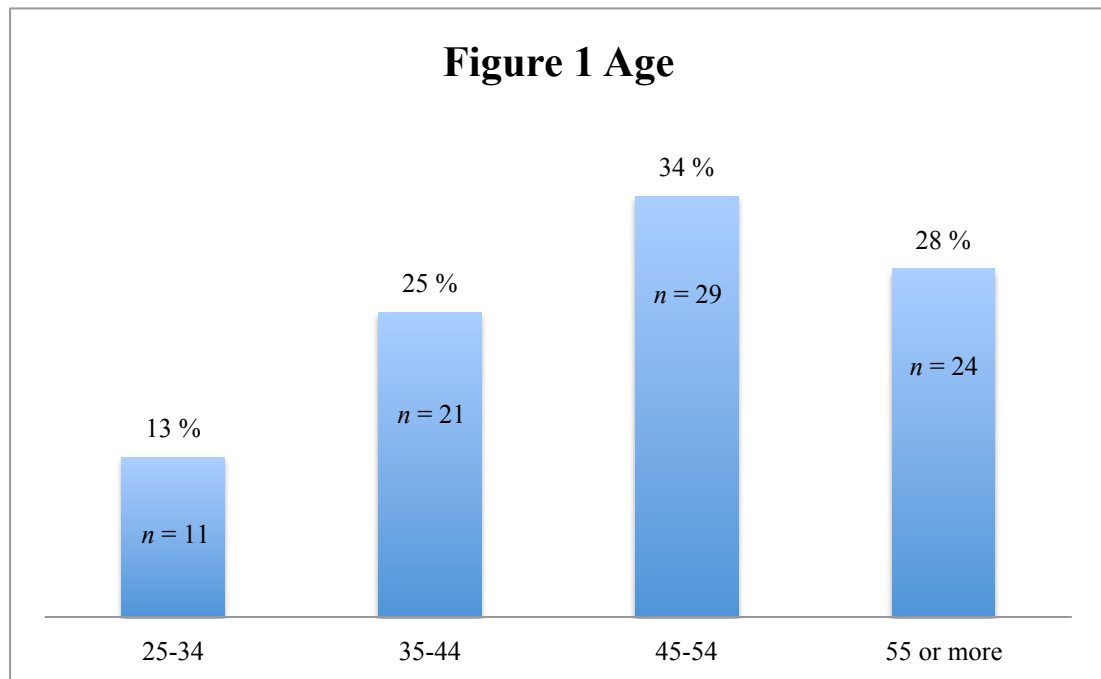


Figure 1: Age

All the respondents were above 24 years old. Most respondents (34 %) were 45-54 years old.

4.1.2 Teaching experience and teacher qualification

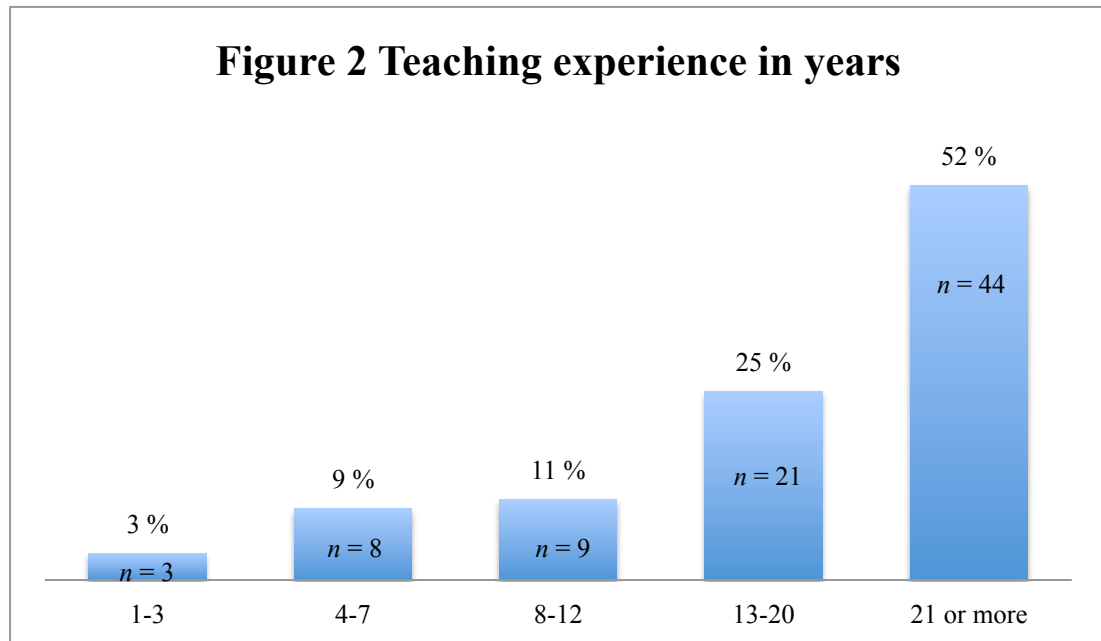


Figure 2: Teaching experience in years

The teachers were asked to estimate how long they had worked as a teacher. This included substitute teaching experience. Most teachers were considerably experienced: over a half of them (52 %) had 21 years or more teaching experience, and a total of 77 % at least 13 years of teaching experience behind them. All the teachers except for one were qualified subject teachers.

4.1.3 Other teaching subjects

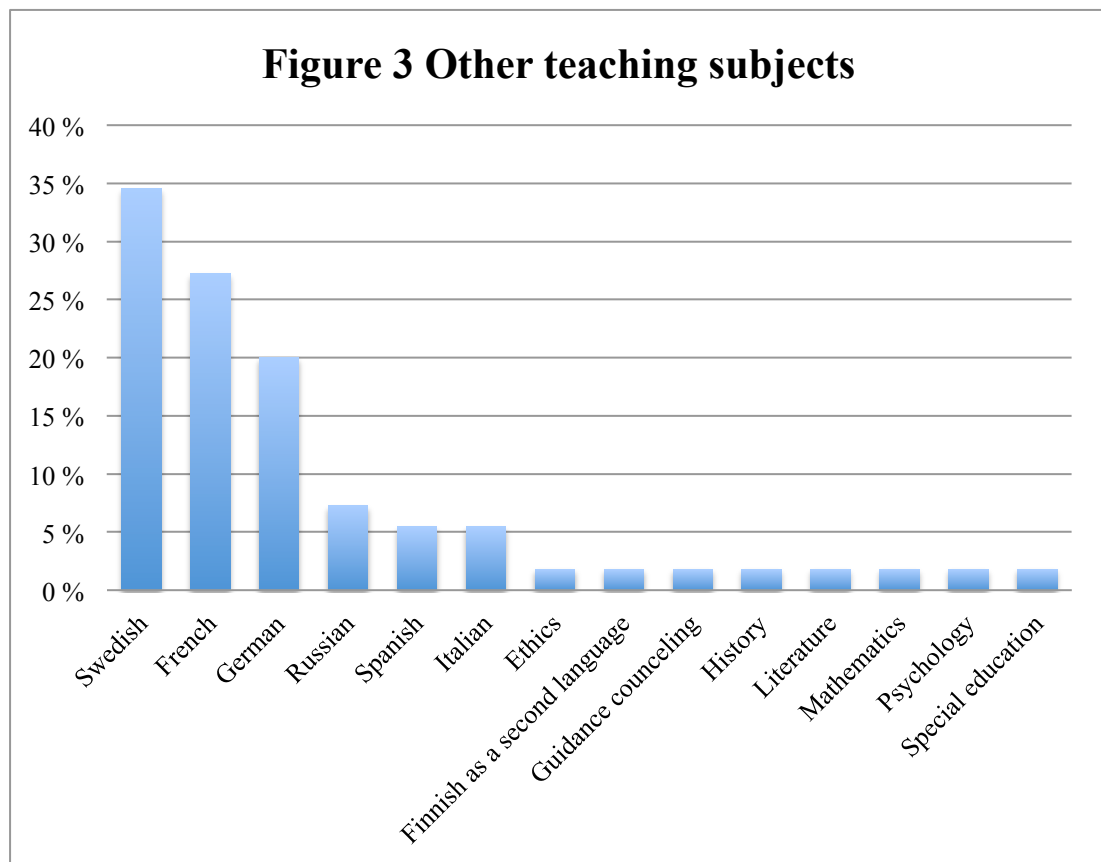


Figure 3: Other teaching subjects

Most teachers (65 %, $n = 55$) taught another subject in addition to English. Among them the three most common subjects were Swedish (35 %), French (27 %) and German (20 %). 30 teachers (35 %) did not teach any other subject in addition to English.

It can be concluded that an average respondent was an experienced, qualified subject teacher in their 40s or 50s with an average of two teaching subjects.

4.2 Questionnaire results

4.2.1 Average number of students

The average number of students in an English class was 26, ranging from 12 to 36 students.

4.2.2 Frequency of oral exercises

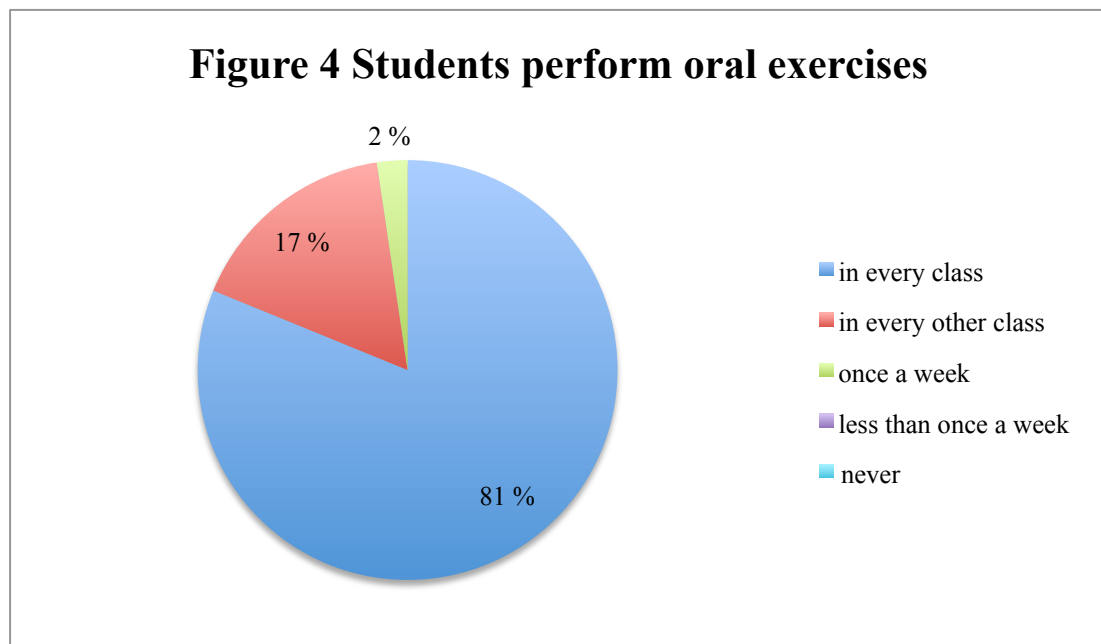


Figure 4: Frequency of oral exercises

According to the teachers, students perform oral exercises at least once a week and the vast majority of them (81 %) in every class.

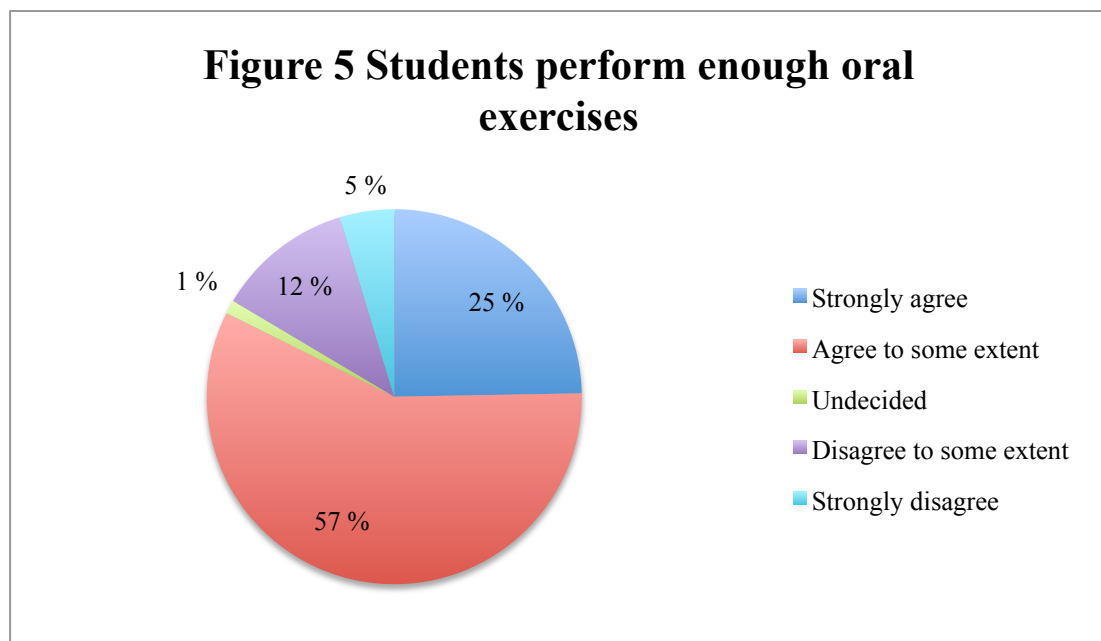


Figure 5: Sufficiency of oral exercises

Most teachers (82 %) agreed at least to some extent that their students perform enough oral exercises. 17 % disagreed at least to some extent with the statement. The teachers seemed to share a common consensus that practicing oral skills is important, but due to lack of time it is not always possible:

- (1) There should be at least one oral exercise in every class, but sometimes there is no time for that.
- (2) We would do more [oral exercises] if we had more time.

Students' lack of motivation was another factor that was frequently brought up. The teachers reported that part of the students do not concentrate on the oral exercises enough. They do them hastily or not at all:

- (3) Even though there are oral exercises, part of the students skim through them quickly.
- (4) Students are offered enough opportunities to practice [oral skills]. Some students use these opportunities effectively, others don't.

4.2.3 Frequency of assessing oral skills

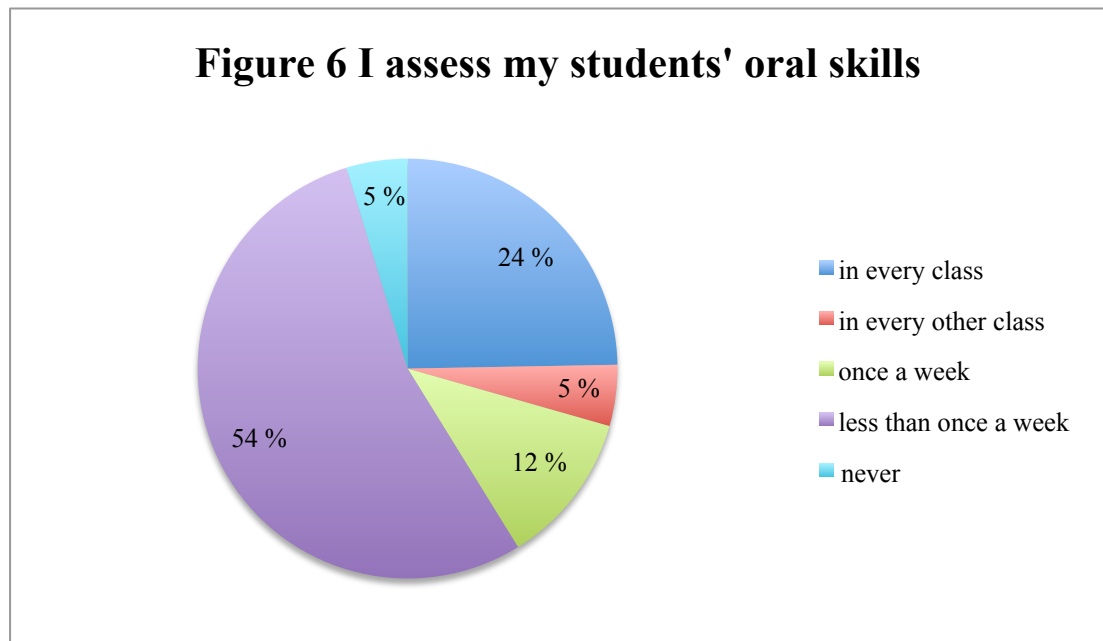


Figure 6: Frequency of assessing oral skills

More than a half of the teachers (54 %) estimated that they assess their students' oral skills less than once a week. Then again, approximately one quarter of the teachers (24 %) reported that they assess them in every class.

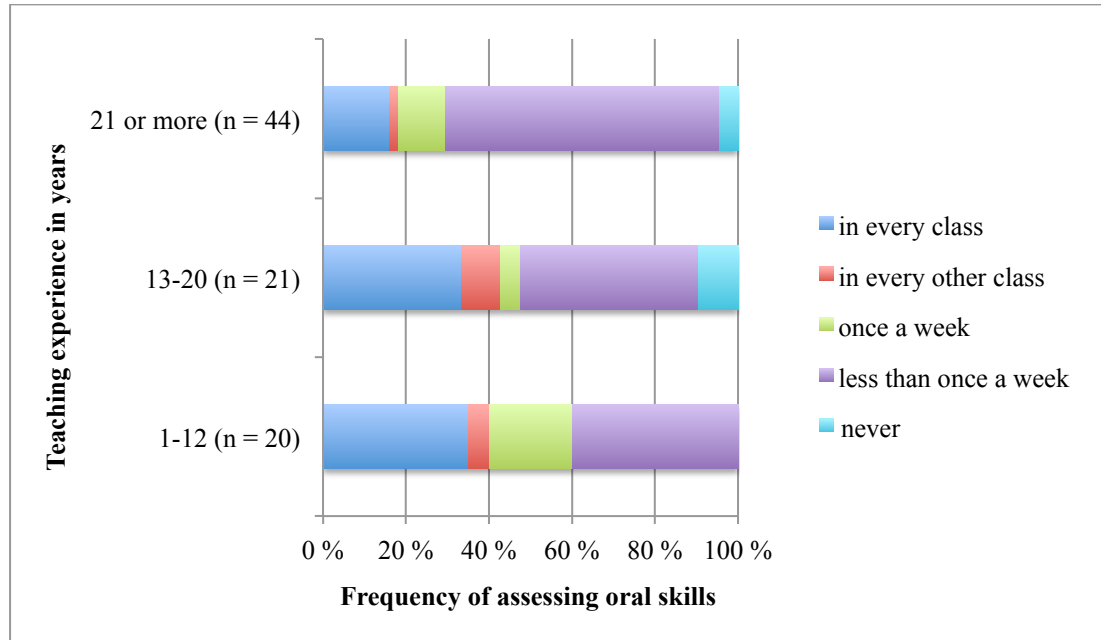


Figure 7: Compared frequency of assessing oral skills

Figure 7 shows that the more experienced the teacher, the less they assess oral skills.

Most teachers reported that they assess oral skills formatively by going around the class, listening to the students, and giving them feedback. Summative, numerical and what one teacher termed as “formal” assessment were considerably less common than formative assessment:

- (5) I assess [oral] skills in every class by going around the class, and I try to give feedback for everyone as often as possible. There is less assessment that would affect the course grade, but some in every course.
- (6) [There is] no numerical or structured assessment. If anything, I assess activity and effort.
- (7) I wasn't sure whether to answer 'in every class' or 'never', since I don't perform formal assessment, but when I talk with my students I make mental notes in my head all the time.

Big group sizes were frequently mentioned as a consequent reason for the use of formative assessment:

- (8) Since there are so many students, it's impossible to assess them all even once a week. I do go around listening to [them having] conversations and reading [aloud], but there is no way one teacher could have resources to assess each one of the students that often.

Then again, some teachers reported that they assess their students' oral presentations, videos, and audio recordings:

- (9) I assess oral performances recorded and submitted by the students in almost every course.
- (10) The course almost always includes either a video that has to be submitted or an oral presentation in front of the class, which will be assessed.

4.2.4 Assessment methods

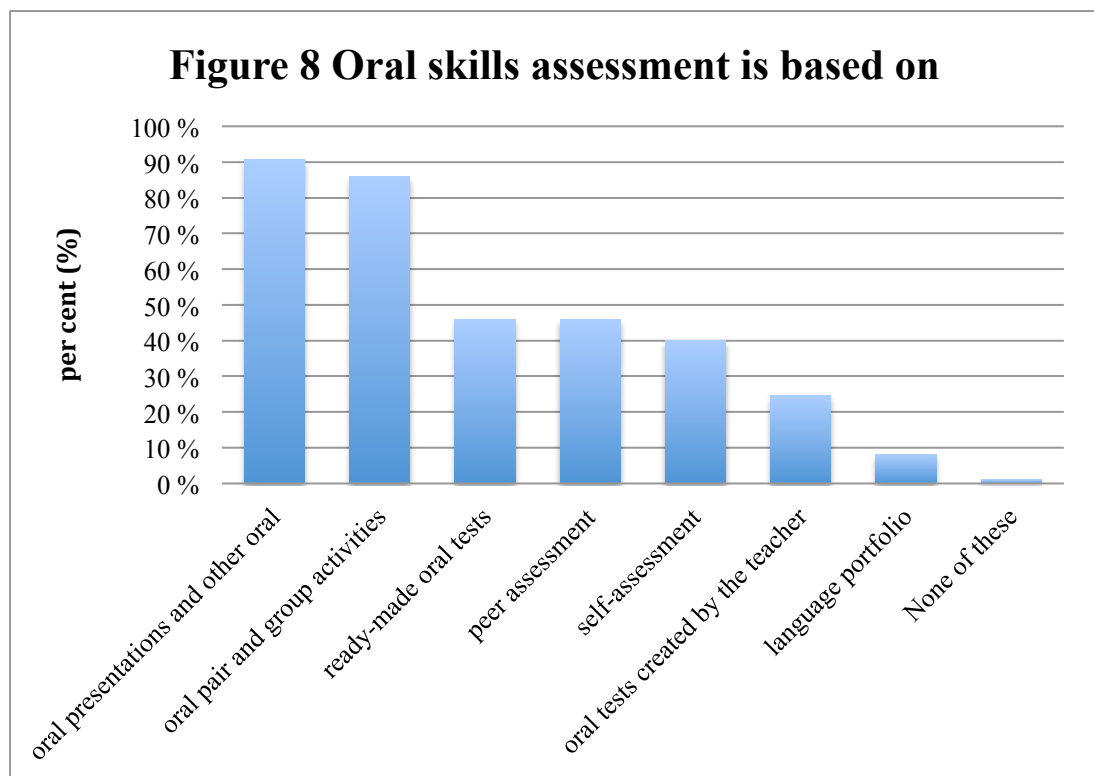


Figure 8: Assessment methods

The teachers used an average of 3,44 methods to assess their students. The two most popular methods were 1) oral presentations and other oral projects and activities, such as videos and audio recordings (91 %), and 2) oral pair and group activities (86 %). Ready-made oral tests, such as tests included in the coursebook and test bank materials, were more popular (46 %) than oral tests created by the teacher (25 %). Peer assessment (46 %) was a little more popular than self-assessment (40 %). Language portfolio was used by 8 % of the teachers. One teacher did not use any of the abovementioned methods to assess students.

4.2.5 Difficulty of assessing oral skills

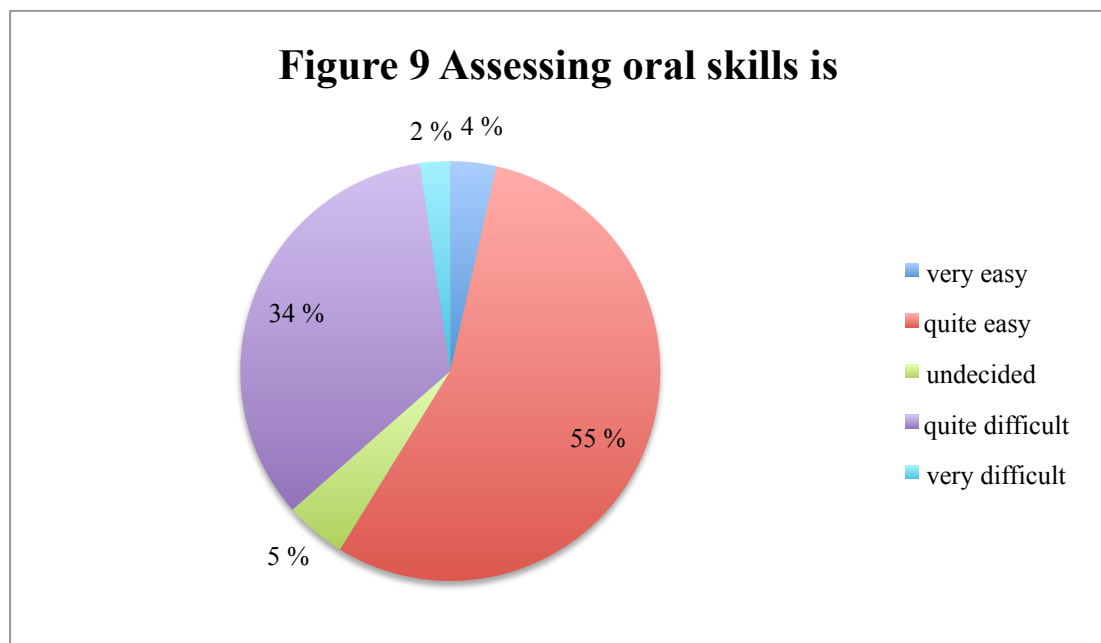


Figure 9: Difficulty of assessing oral skills

The perceived difficulty of assessing oral skills resulted in mixed opinions. More than a half of the teachers (55 %) thought that assessing oral skills is quite easy, but then again, approximately one third of them (34 %) considered it quite difficult. The teachers reported that assessing oral skills *per se* is easy, but other factors such as big group sizes and lack of time make it difficult. Some teachers mentioned that they are not always sure which criteria to focus on when assessing oral skills:

- (11) Even though I compare the [test] results to the evolving language proficiency scale, it is difficult to decide on how fluent or natural the student's performance is and which criteria should be focused on: fluency, pronunciation, intonation, use of vocabulary and expressions, etc.

Additionally, many teachers expressed their concern about assessing personality instead of proficiency:

- (12) What is challenging in assessing oral skills is that the student's personality has a huge impact on how they are able to produce language in a test situation. A shy but talented student could perform much better in the real world than during an exciting test situation.

4.2.6 Importance of teaching and assessing oral skills in upper secondary school

The vast majority of the teachers (86 %) considered teaching oral skills in upper secondary school very important. Even the rest of them (14 %) considered it quite important. One of the teachers argued that oral proficiency is the most important language skill in the 'real' world:

- (13) [Oral proficiency is] the most important part of language proficiency in the real world. Defects [in oral skills] have an impact on finding a job and on free-time activities.

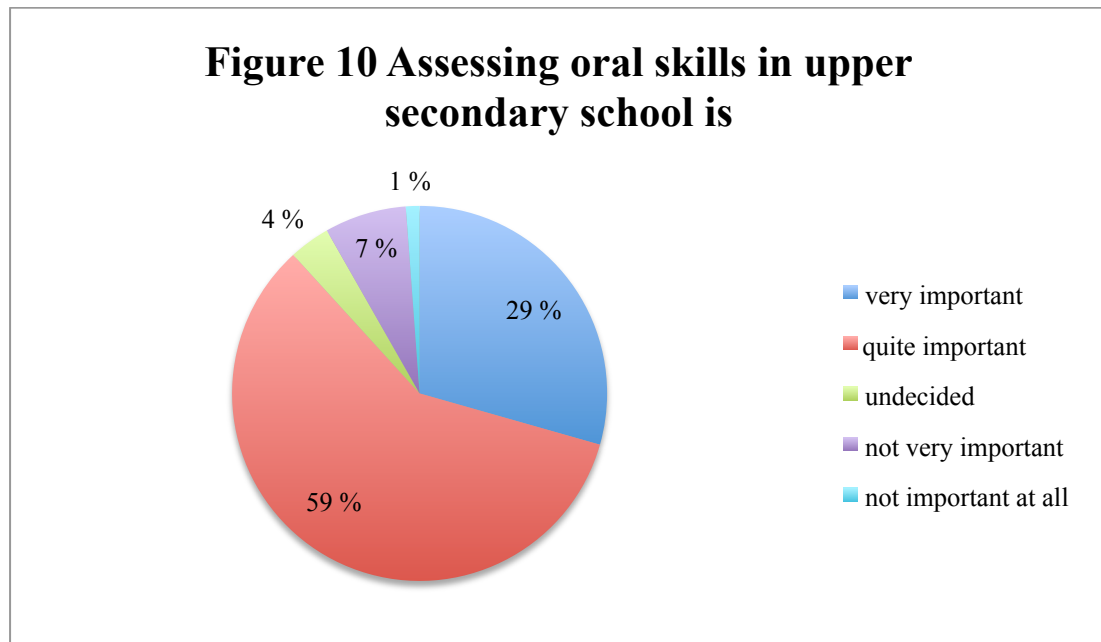


Figure 10: Importance of assessing oral skills

Most teachers (59 %) considered assessing oral skills in upper secondary school quite important and 29 % very important. Some teachers argued that students take the practice of oral skills more seriously when they are assessed, and it may even give an opportunity to improve the course grade:

- (14) Students take it more seriously when they are assessed, and it also makes the teaching more goal-oriented. For gifted speakers it gives an opportunity to improve the grade.

There is a noticeable difference between the perceived importance of teaching and the perceived importance of assessing oral skills. All the teachers considered teaching oral skills in upper secondary school important. However, when it comes to assessing oral skills, 88 % of the teachers considered it important, most of which (59 %) considered it only quite important. A total of 8 % did not consider assessing oral skills in upper secondary school important. It can be concluded that teaching oral skills is perceived as more important than assessing them. In fact, many teachers suggested that even though assessing oral skills is important, letting students practice oral skills regularly in a safe environment is even more important:

- (15) Of course students deserve to receive feedback for their oral skills, but assessing them perpetually might not always be the best [for them]. The most important thing

is to create an atmosphere in the classroom where everyone could have the courage to practice oral skills.

- (16) Oral proficiency should be part of the final assessment depending on what is emphasized in the course. However, I think that regular practice is more important than assessment.

Many teachers were downright skeptical about assessing oral skills and particularly about grading them:

- (17) If assessing means grading, I don't think it's very important, but if it means other forms of assessment, I think it's just as important as the assessment of anything else.
- (18) I don't think assessing is important at all – I would prefer to teach without assessing.
- (19) Excessive assessment ruins the development of communicative capacity, [my students] only perform peer assessment of presentations.

4.2.7 Clarity of the assessment criteria for oral skills

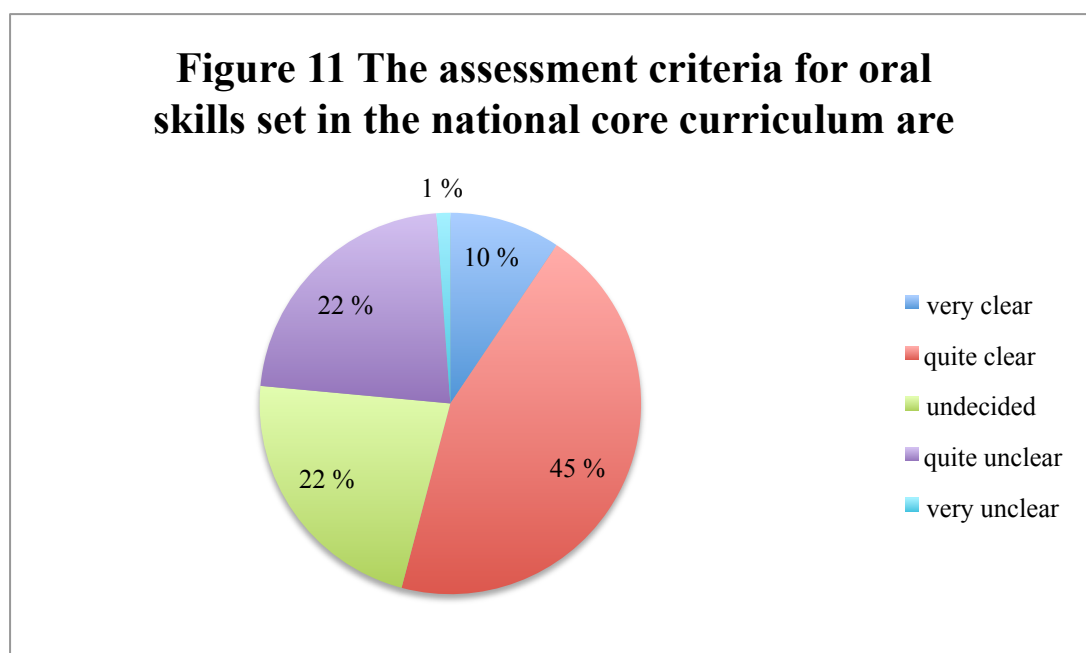


Figure 11: Clarity of the assessment criteria for oral skills

The question about the assessment criteria for oral skills set in the national core curriculum received mixed responses. A little more than a half of the teachers (55 %) thought that the assessment criteria are clear. According to the open-ended responses, the assessment criteria for the spoken course (ENA8) were considered clear, and some teachers reported on using the language proficiency rating scales of the CEFR. However, approximately one fifth of the teachers (22 %) were undecided about their opinion, and another 22 % considered the assessment criteria for the rest of the courses unclear:

(20) [They are just] as unclear as the rest of the assessment criteria.

(21) So far I haven't seen a clear curriculum. It's full of empty phrases. Of course I have read the criteria, but they are not on my mind all the time in class.

(22) As far as the spoken course is concerned, [the assessment criteria are] very clear, otherwise [they are] extremely vague. What should be emphasized? What percentage? What kinds of skills are required at each stage? Then again, this is a problem of upper secondary language teaching anyway, since only the target level has been defined. The teacher determines the relationship between the target level and the course grades. In practice, the assessment is based on general custom, tradition, and on feedback the teacher receives from their [preliminary] assessment in the Matriculation Examination.

4.2.8 Training on how to teach, test and assess oral skills

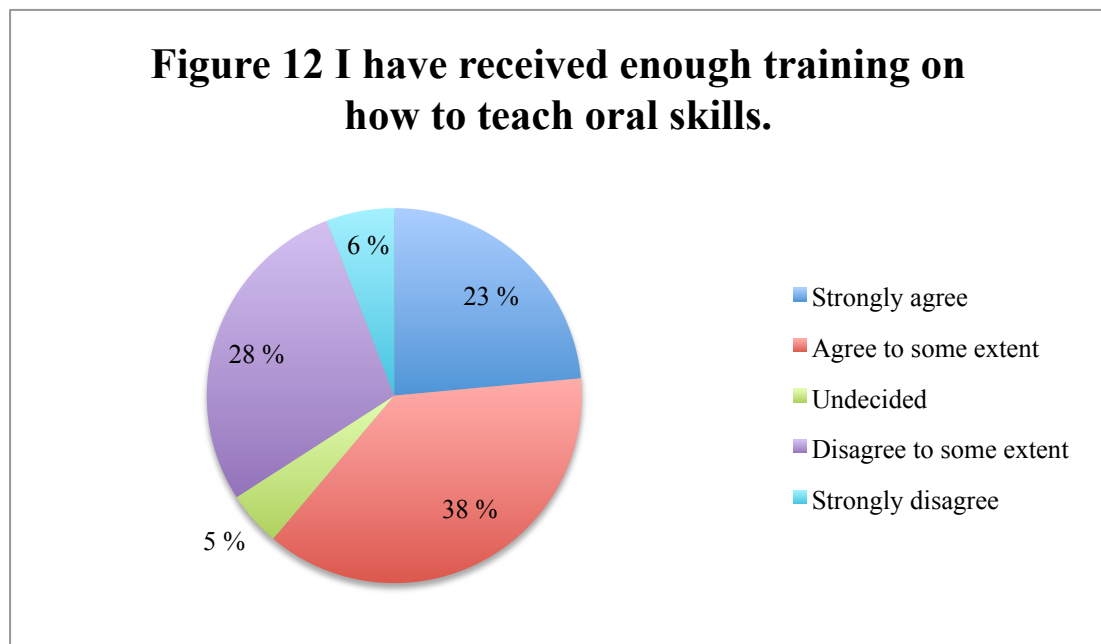


Figure 12: Training on how to teach oral skills

Most teachers (61 %) reported that they had received enough training on how to teach oral skills. However, approximately one third of them (34 %) disagreed with the statement. Some teachers thought that teaching experience compensates for the lack of formal training:

(23) One only learns to teach by teaching.

Others felt that there is a need for further training:

(24) They should offer more continuing training on [how to teach oral skills].

(25) In recent years, there has been an emphasis on digitalization [i.e. *digiloikka*] in the continuing education programs. I think that teaching how to debate, for instance, is challenging.

Figure 13 I have received enough training on how to test and assess oral skills.

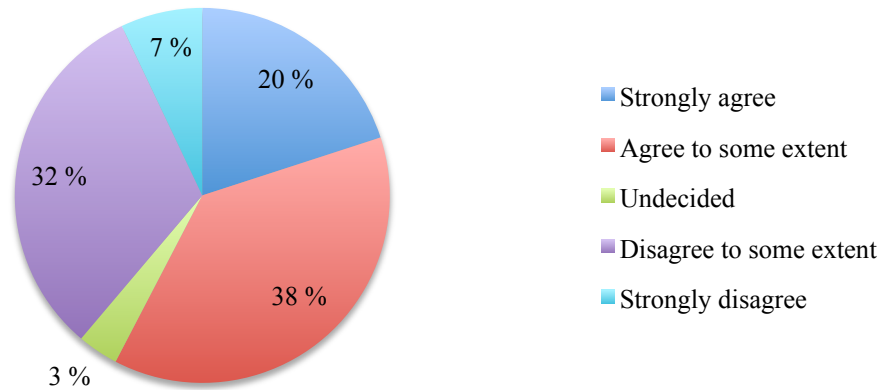


Figure 13: Training on how to test and assess oral skills

Most teachers (58 %) reported that they had received enough training on how to test and assess oral skills, which is 3 % less than in the previous figure (12) on teaching oral skills. However, 39 % of them disagreed with the statement, which is 5 % more than in the previous figure (12). To conclude, it seems that there is a need for continuing training on teaching, testing and assessing oral skills, and particularly on testing and assessing them.

4.2.9 Matriculation Examination and the oral test

Figure 14 There should be an oral test in the Matriculation Examination for English.

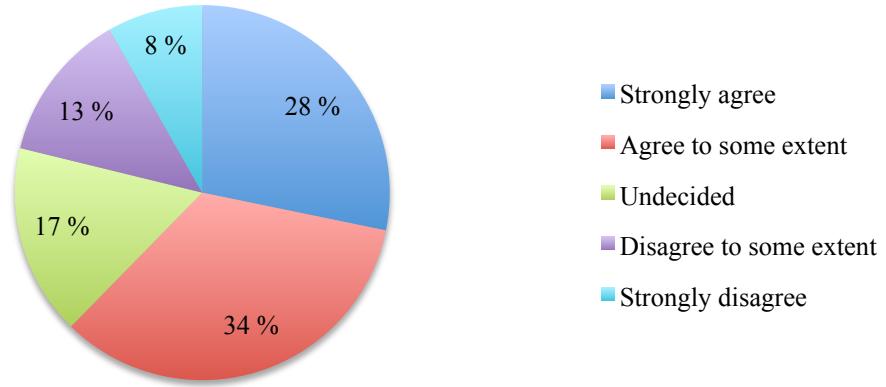


Figure 14: Including an oral test in the Matriculation Examination

Most teachers (62 %) supported the view that there should be an oral test in the Matriculation Examination for English. However, approximately one fifth of them (21 %) disagreed and 17 % were undecided about the statement.

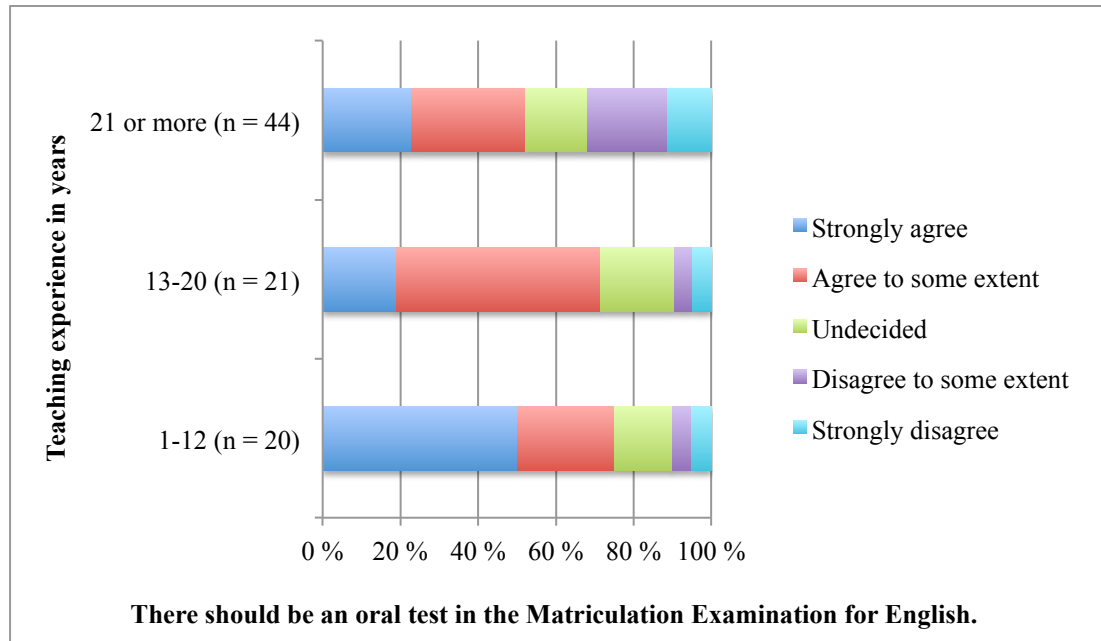


Figure 15: Compared views on including an oral test in the Matriculation Examination

Figure 15 shows that the more experienced the teacher, the less likely they are willing to include an oral test in the Matriculation Examination for English.

According to the open-ended responses, many teachers were positive about including an oral test, but worried about the practicalities. For instance, they were aware of the strong washback effect that the test would have on the teaching and learning of oral skills:

- (26) The requirements of the Matriculation Examination are strongly reflected in the teaching, especially in the final courses.
- (27) [Including an oral test] would motivate the students to practice oral skills.

Many teachers were concerned about the large number of students that would take the English exam. For instance, in spring 2018 as many as 20 000 students took the Matriculation Examination for English (Takala 2018):

- (28) In principle, there should be [an oral test], but the practicalities will be catastrophic with the [large] amount of students that would take the exam.
- (29) I teach also in an IB program, where the final exams always include an oral test. Preparing, recording, assessing, and sending the test to a follow-up assessment is a laborious task. With the thousands of candidates that would take the exam, how could this be put into practice without straining the teachers excessively? The Matriculation Examination for English is already laborious to assess as it is.

Some teachers were concerned about the increasing workload and whether they would be recompensed for it:

- (30) There should be a [oral] test, but I'm concerned that the language teachers' workload would increase without any recompense.
- (31) Firstly, it should be outlined how [the oral test] would be put into practice and how the teachers would be recompensed for the assessment.

Additionally, there was skepticism about the computer-assisted oral test that would not include authentic face-to-face interaction:

- (32) The present oral test, which is completed in pairs (course 8), is great. In talking to a computer, there will be no natural interaction.

- (33) Is it possible for everyone to show their skills by talking to a computer when there is no authentic interaction [?]
- (34) Would the students be talking to themselves or with a computer? [The latter] would not serve the purpose of using language skills to communicate with other people.

The implementation of the assessment provoked various concerns:

- (35) Too heavy to be assessed.
- (36) I'm concerned about the practicalities and how an equal, nation-wide assessment could be implemented.
- (37) If the teachers have to perform the preliminary assessment at school, it should be taken into account that small schools usually have only one teacher. Where would they get the second assessor?
- (38) I don't know how it could be done in the present situation. There should be more than one assessor for each test performance.
- (39) Who assesses? Would all the tests be sent to the Matriculation Examination Board?
- (40) I'm concerned about the implementation and especially about the assessment. [Including an oral test] means extra work, because assessing an oral test is a slow process (compared to the exam of the National Board of Education, which is 20 minutes in duration).
- (41) Would everyone [i.e. the teachers] receive continuing training for the assessment?

Some teachers were concerned about the negative influence of the oral test to the candidates:

- (42) Stress affects test performance. How is this going to be taken into account?
- (43) Would it be possible to create as authentic a situation as possible that would NOT STRESS OUT the students?

The teachers that opposed the idea of including an oral test did not consider its a useful or even a possible idea.

- (44) Not everything has to be tested, at least not in the Matriculation Examination.

- (45) I think that section 2.2 would be sufficient enough as a way to evaluate their skills, where they write their responses to different questions, etc.
- (46) I don't understand how it could be implemented and that's why I'm strongly against it.

Figure 16 If an oral test is included in the Matriculation Examination for English, it will affect the teaching and assessment of oral skills.

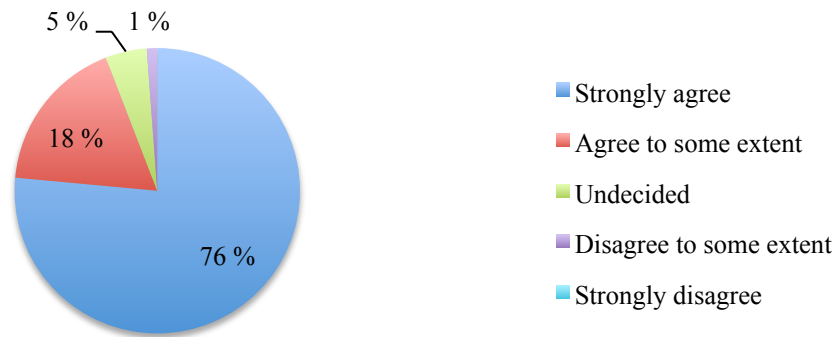


Figure 16: Influence of an oral test to the teaching and assesment of oral skills

The vast majority of the teachers (94 %) estimated that including an oral test in the Matriculation Examination for English will influence the teaching and assessment of oral skills, most of which (76 %) strongly agreed with the statement:

- (47) Teachers would have to devote more time to practicing these skills in the classroom.
- (48) More attention should be paid to the assessment in the obligatory courses, and the students should receive more feedback.

Some teachers argued that the oral course (ENA8) would become more popular:

- (49) The students would choose the oral course even more often (even now well over a half [of the students choose the course]).

The teachers seemed to share a common consensus that the Matriculation Examination has a strong washback effect on practicing oral skills in upper secondary school:

(50) The Matriculation Examination has always governed the teaching, and that's how it will be this time, too.

(51) The Matriculation Examination still governs all the activities in upper secondary schools (at least in our school) and it seems that the teachers share a common consensus that what does not prepare for the examination, is useless. Why care about skills that influence the rest of your life when the most important thing is to help students achieve a good grade from a test of six hours' duration with full of stumbling blocks. Sigh....

Figure 17 If an oral test is included in the Matriculation Examination for English, it will affect the teaching and assessment of written skills

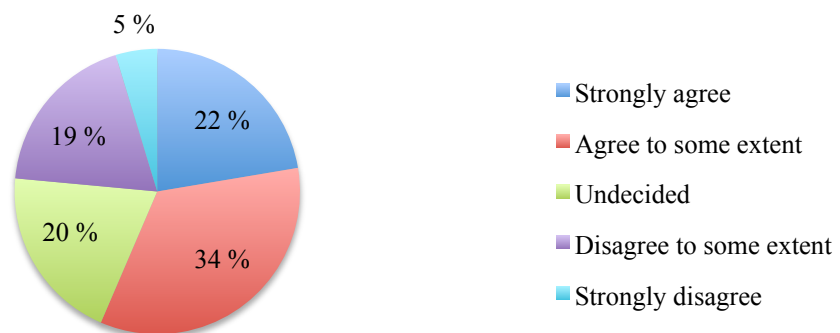


Figure 17: Influence of an oral test to the teaching and assessment of written skills

More than a half of the teachers (56 %) agreed at least to some extent that including an oral test in the Matriculation Examination for English will influence the teaching and assessment of written skills. However, approximately a quarter of them (24 %) disagreed with the statement and a fifth (20 %) were undecided. Many teachers estimated that including an oral test would redirect the focus from practicing written skills to oral skills:

- (52) Practicing for the oral test will most likely divert time from practicing for the written test.
- (53) There are a limited number of classes. If something is increased, something else has to be decreased.

One teacher argued that one of the purposes of upper secondary school is to prepare students for higher education studies, which emphasize written expression:

- (54) [The teaching and assessment of written skills] will not disappear, because one of the purposes of upper secondary school is to prepare students for higher education studies, and naturally written expression is and will remain in the academic world.

To conclude, the teachers were almost certain that the new test would affect the teaching and assessment of oral skills, but it was more difficult for them to see the same influence to the teaching and assessment of written skills.

4.2.10 Other comments

In the last part of the survey the teachers were free to comment on, for instance, the teaching and assessment of oral skills, the Matriculation Examination for English, and the survey. Especially the testing of oral skills in the Matriculation Examination proved to be a thought-provoking topic. Despite the generally positive stance towards practicing oral skills, these teachers argued that testing and assessing oral skills numerically might not be necessary as it could have a negative impact on some students' willingness to practice oral skills:

- (55) Including an oral test in the Matriculation Examination means, at least for my part, that I would probably have to start assessing oral skills numerically in the obligatory courses, as well. I think that language teaching as a whole has developed now that oral language is part of it, but I'm not sure whether numerical assessment during the courses makes it any better. It might even have a negative impact on the students' willingness to speak a foreign language.

- (56) In principle, I think that emphasizing oral language skills is a great thing. In fact, it could be even more present in the teaching. However, including an oral test in the Matriculation Examination sounds a very challenging task (the practicalities), and I am not convinced about its necessity, either. Does everything have to be tested with an exam? Wouldn't the present model (a separate certificate of oral skills for those who have completed the optional speaking course) be sufficient even in future? How about speech disorders and language anxiety?

There were many wishes concerning the implementation of the oral test:

- (57) The oral test should not be assessed by computer, but by a teacher.
- (58) It would be great to be able to compare your assessing skills to e.g. those of the censors.
- (59) It [the oral test] is included in the Matriculation Examination, the assessment criteria must be clear. I think that a one-off oral test is not suitable for all the students.

Additionally, the optional oral course (ENA8) provoked various thoughts.

- (60) Testing oral skills is challenging in big groups. During a short oral exercise, the teacher won't have time to listen to everybody (often approximately 35 students) in the group. In the oral course the situation is different since the group size is max. 20 [students].
- (61) I think that ENA8, the oral course, should become obligatory if the oral test is included in the Matriculation Examination. At the moment the students who are already good at oral skills choose the course ENA8 in our school. For the rest [of the students] the threshold [for choosing the course] is higher due to assessment.
- (62) The oral tests prepared by the National Board of Education are very different in terms of difficulty. It is one thing to discuss child soldiers, but quite another to discuss hobbies or, for instance, how young people use money. Therefore, the grades achieved from the tests are not comparable, either.

Now that the results have been presented, it is time to discuss them in more detail.

5 DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to identify upper secondary school teachers' views on the teaching and assessment of oral language skills and on the upcoming computer-assisted testing of oral skills in the Matriculation Examination for English. In the following subsections each research question will be discussed separately. Firstly, section 5.1 deals with the present situation of oral language teaching and assessment in Finland. In section 5.2 I will move on to discuss the teachers' perceptions of their current knowledge of oral language teaching and assessment. Lastly, in section 5.3 I will look into the testing of oral language skills in the Matriculation Examination and how it will affect the teachers' teaching and assessment practices. I will finish the discussion section by considering the limitations of study and giving suggestions for future research.

5.1 How do Finnish upper secondary school teachers of English teach and assess oral language skills in Finland?

According to the findings of the present study, the teachers have grasped well the broad text definition of the national core curriculum in that they teach oral skills frequently. The vast majority of the teachers reported that they teach oral skills in every class, even though lack of time and students' lack of motivation make it challenging. The teachers assess oral skills formatively by going around the class, listening to the students and giving them feedback as they perform oral tasks. Summative and numerical assessment are considerably less common due to big group sizes.

Lack of students' motivation can be considered an interesting result given that there are several studies that show that students are highly motivated in practicing oral skills (see e.g. Ahola-Houtsonen 2013; Mäkelä 2005; Yli-Renko 1991; Takala 1977). Then again, it is not that surprising considering the lack of an oral test in the Matriculation Examination. In terms of future research, it would be interesting to explore whether there is a correlation between the students' motivation to practice

oral skills and the number of completed English courses; if the students' motivation drops towards the end of upper secondary education, it might indicate that the Matriculation Examination is indeed to blame.

One of the most intriguing findings of the study is that the more experienced the teacher, the less they seem to assess oral skills. However, this might as well be a question of what these teachers consider as assessment in the first place. According to the national core curriculum (2015: 143), assessment in foreign languages consists of “versatile feedback” that should be provided “at the different stages of the learning process in all courses”. It is then possible that experienced teachers, who have received their initial teacher training years ago, tend to hold more traditional views of assessment and consider it essentially summative in nature.

On the average, the teachers use three methods to assess their students. Oral presentations and other oral projects and activities, such as videos and audio recordings, are the most popular methods. Rapid technological advances in the past decades and the ongoing digitalization (i.e. *digiloikka*) of the Finnish education system have brought computers, laptops, interactive whiteboards, cell phones, and tablets to modern language classrooms. One of the greatest advantages of using these technologies in language teaching is their flexibility; they cater to a variety of different learning styles, which, in turn, leads to sustained motivation among learners (Strambi & Bouvet 2003). In Kessler's study (2010) allowing flexibility in learners choosing their recording environment for an oral task resulted in higher fluency and lower perceptions of anxiety. From the teacher's perspective, technology can become an attractive tool to reduce workload and free time and resources for other activities in class. However, it is important to note that assigning students with unsupervised, independent work requires careful instruction to ensure that they are familiar with the technology used and possess sufficient language proficiency to carry out the task in question successfully (Stockwell 2013: 165).

In addition to videos and audio recordings, oral pair and group activities are popular methods of assessment. Communicative oral exercises of the contemporary textbooks used in Finnish upper secondary schools tend to be pair and group activities, which explains their popularity as an assessment method. Ready-made oral tests, such as tests included in the coursebook or test bank materials, are more

popular than oral tests created by the teacher. Again, this might well be a matter of workload, since ready-made oral tests do not require as much preparation in advance. Additionally, they might be more reliable as they have been carefully reviewed before publishing. As an assessment method, peer assessment is a little more popular than self-assessment. One possible explanation for this is that peer assessment may be a natural choice for oral tasks, which are almost always interactive in nature and typically include more than one student. Finally, language portfolios are the least popular method of assessing oral skills. According to Kohonen (2000: 74), the Matriculation Examination is, once again, to blame. Upper secondary school students are skeptical about the usefulness of the language portfolio in preparing for the examination. In the national core curriculum (2015: 143) it is stated that language portfolios can be used in all courses. However, Kantelinen and Hildén (2012) argue that the role of language portfolios particularly in the assessment process of language proficiency needs further clarification.

5.2 How do they evaluate their current knowledge of oral language teaching and assessment?

It seems that assessing oral skills is not fully unproblematic in Finnish upper secondary schools. Even though more than a half of the teachers reported that assessing oral skills is easy, as many as one third of them found it difficult. Assessing itself is considered easy, but other factors such as big group sizes and lack of time make it difficult, which is in line with, for instance, Huuskonen & Kähkönen's (2006) findings.

One likely explanation for the lack of time is that in upper secondary schools teaching is mainly focused on the practice of written skills, which are tested in the Matriculation Examination. The teachers do not want to spend too much time on activities that will not prepare students for the Matriculation Examination, even if they think they would be useful in terms of practicing for the 'real' world. Then again, teachers have time to read and grade essays, because written skills will – and have always been – tested and, thus, are worthy of assessment during the courses, as well. Therefore, the so-called lack of time is really just a matter choice, even though

it is only understandable that the teachers prefer to spend most of the time on preparing students for the Matriculation Examination as thoroughly as possible.

In a sense, big groups sizes and lack of time are part of the same problem; going around the class and listening to each student's performance individually is a laborious and time-consuming task. Again, the use of different technologies, such as videos and audio recordings, might be a realizable solution for this. Moreover, recording the performances would enhance the reliability of the assessment, since it would not be based solely on the assessor's memory of the performance.

The teachers consider teaching and assessing oral skills in upper secondary school highly important, which is supported by previous research (see e.g. Ahola-Houtsonen 2013; Huuskonen & Kähkönen 2006; Tattari 2001). However, teaching oral skills and letting students practice oral skills regularly in a safe environment are considered more important than assessing or grading them, which is understandable. When we speak, we cannot "hide" behind words. Instead, speaking is rather an intimate reflection of who we are (Celce-Murcia, Brinton & Goodwin 1996), and drawing a line between who we are and how we speak a language might appear even more intimidating to the assessor, that is, the teacher. The intimate nature of speaking might also explain the fear of speaking foreign languages, which is by no means a new phenomenon. In Yli-Renko's study (1991) as many as 90 % of Finnish upper secondary school students reported that they experience fear of speaking foreign languages due to lack of oral practice and the negative washback effect of the written Matriculation Examination, among other reasons. The individualized and flexible potential of computer-assisted language learning (CALL) environments to reduce speaking anxiety (see Kessler 2010) should not be overlooked.

The assessment criteria for oral skills set in the national core curriculum (2015) are not as clearly put as they could be. Even though more than a half of the teachers thought that the assessment criteria are clear, approximately one quarter of the teachers considered them unclear, and more than one fifth were undecided about their response. The teachers who were undecided about their opinion might have been either unfamiliar with the criteria or simply confused because of the formulation of the question. The instruction of languages and their assessment criteria set in the national core curriculum (2015) are based on a broad text

definition, which encompasses both oral and written language (National core curriculum 2015: 142). Therefore, oral and written skills have the same assessment criteria.

Most of the teachers reported that they had received enough training on how to teach, test and assess oral skills. However, approximately one third of them disagreed with the statement, which indicates that there is a need for continuing training on teaching, testing and assessing oral skills, and particularly on testing and assessing them. Huuskonen & Kähkönen (2006), for instance, have arrived at a similar conclusion in their study.

5.3 How do they think the testing of oral language skills in the Matriculation Examination will affect their teaching and assessment practices?

Including an oral test in the Matriculation Examination for English proved to be one of the most controversial topics of the present study. In line with previous research (e.g. Huuskonen & Kähkönen 2006; Tattari 2001) the teachers support the idea, but they are skeptical about the implementation of the test. The large number of candidates, increasing workload without sufficient recompense, lack of authentic interaction in the oral test, implementation of the assessment, and increasing stress among the candidates were among the most common concerns. The more experienced the teacher, the less likely they were willing to include an oral test in the Matriculation Examination for English. This resistance to change can be considered fairly natural given that the present bipartite exam for English has already been around for decades. In the end, a new computer-assisted oral test would unarguably be one of the biggest – if not the biggest – single change to the language exams. Change might appear as scary, especially to those who have been used to the current state of affairs the longest.

The vast majority of the teachers think that including an oral test in the examination will affect the teaching and assessment of oral skills. It is therefore evident that they are aware of the strong washback effect of the Matriculation Examination. Interestingly, however, the estimated influence of an oral test to the teaching and

assessment of written skills is not as strong as it is to the teaching and assessment of oral skills. There are several possible explanations for this. Firstly, it might be more difficult to see the influence of an oral test to the teaching and assessment of written skills because of the heavy emphasis on the practice of written skills in upper secondary education. Secondly, some teachers might think that the purpose of general upper secondary education is to prepare students for higher education studies, where written skills have been traditionally emphasized. Given that as many as one fifth of the respondents were undecided about their response, it is clear that there are still plenty of unanswered questions surrounding the topic.

5.4 Limitations of the study and suggestions for future research

There are several limitations to the present study. Firstly, teachers that were specifically interested in the topic of the study or had strong opinions about the teaching and assessment of oral skills were more likely to participate in the study. This might have twisted the results and make them appear more dramatic than the reality. Additionally, the results are not fully generalizable given that most of these teachers were considerably experienced. A more balanced variety of teachers might have provided different results. Lastly, interpreting qualitative data is prone to subjectivity. It is therefore worth mentioning that another researcher might have drawn different conclusions about the open-ended data of the study.

Considering the novelty of the topic, it is safe to say that it offers a plethora of opportunities for future research. Closer scrutiny of the implementation of the test and its challenges, for instance, would be of much use in the near future. Additionally, a survey on the teachers' views similar to the present study might come into question after the implementation of the test.

6 CONCLUSION

The present study attempted to shed light on the current state of teaching and assessing oral skills in Finnish upper secondary schools in the advent of computer-assisted oral language testing in the Matriculation Examination. In line with previous research, Finnish upper secondary school teachers of English are highly supportive of the teaching and assessment of oral skills, but big groups sizes, lack of time, and students' lack of motivation continue to make it challenging. Considering the role of the Matriculation Examination as the hidden curriculum of Finnish upper secondary education, the implementation of an oral test might well become a viable solution for this. Until then, the use of modern technologies, such as tablets and cell phones, is an accessible tool to patch up the chronic struggles associated with the teaching and assessment of oral skills.

Assessing oral skills, in particular, appears problematic in Finnish upper secondary schools. The assessment criteria set in the national core curriculum are not as clearly put as they could be. Additionally, there seems to be a need for continuing training on teaching, testing and assessing oral skills, and particularly on testing and assessing them. The unclear role of oral language skills in the present upper secondary education can be attributed to the fact that the Matriculation Examination is still lacking a speaking test.

On the average, the teachers support the idea of including an oral test in the Matriculation Examination for English, but are skeptical about its implementation. Especially the more experienced teachers tend to be doubtful about including an oral test. The most common concerns include the large number of candidates that would take the exam, increasing workload without sufficient recompense, lack of authentic interaction in the test, implementation of the assessment, and increasing stress among the candidates.

The teachers are well aware of the fact that the Matriculation Examination is the hidden curriculum of Finnish upper secondary education. It is then safe to assume that including an oral test in the examination would most likely solve the majority of the problems associated with the teaching and assessment of oral skills. Considering

the role of the teacher as the central influencing factor in education reforms, it becomes clear that providing enough continuing training opportunities for the teachers is a prerequisite for the successful implementation of the future oral test.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A. Questionnaire

Tutkimus suullisen kielitaidon opetuksesta ja arvioinnista lukiossa

Tervetuloa vastaamaan suullisen kielitaidon opetusta ja arviointia koskevaan kyselytutkimukseen. Vastaaminen vie noin 5 minuuttia. Vastaukset käsitellään ehdottoman luottamuksellisesti ja siten, ettei yksittäistä vastaajaa voida niistä tunnistaa.

Pohjatiedot

Ikä

18-24
25-34
35-44
45-54
55 tai enemmän

Opettajakokemus vuosina

Alle vuosi
1-3
4-7
8-12
13-20
21 tai enemmän

Onko sinulla aineenopettajan pätevyys?

Kyllä
Ei

Muut opetettavat aineet englannin lisäksi:

Tutkimuskysymykset

Vastatessasi kysymyksiin ajattele tavallista englannin kielen oppituntia (ei siis suullista kielitaitoa painottavia oppitunteja tai kursseja).

1. Keskimääräinen opiskelijamäärä englannin kielen oppitunnilla (numeroin):

2. Opiskelijat tekevät suullisia harjoituksia

Joka tunti
Joka toinen tunti
Kerran viikossa
Harvemmin kuin kerran viikossa
Ei koskaan

3. Mielestäni opiskelijat tekevät suullisia harjoituksia riittävästi.

Täysin samaa mieltä
Jonkin verran samaa mieltä
En osaa sanoa
Jonkin verran eri mieltä
Täysin eri mieltä

3. Halutessasi voit tarkentaa vastaustasi tähän:

4. Arvioin opiskelijoiden suullista kielitaitoa

Joka tunti
Joka toinen tunti
Kerran viikossa
Harvemmin kuin kerran viikossa
En koskaan

4. Halutessasi voit tarkentaa vastaustasi tähän:

5. Opiskelijoiden suullisen kielitaidon arviointiin vaikuttaa (voit valita useita)

Suullinen pari- ja ryhmätyöskentely tunnilla
Opettajan itse laatimat suulliset kokeet
Valmiit suulliset kokeet (esim. kurssikirjan tai koepankin)
Esitelmät ja muut suullista kielitaitoa mittaavat työt ja projektit (esim. videot ja äänitallenteet)
Itsearviointi
Vertaisarviointi
Kielisalkkutyöskentely
Ei mikään näistä

5. Muut mahdolliset suullisen kielitaidon arviointiin käytetyt menetelmät:

6. Koen suullisen kielitaidon arvioinnin

Erittäin helpoksi
Melko helpoksi
En osaa sanoa
Melko haastavaksi
Erittäin haastavaksi

6. Halutessasi voit tarkentaa vastaustasi tähän:

7. Pidän suullisen kielitaidon opetusta lukiossa

Erittäin tärkeänä
Melko tärkeänä
En osaa sanoa
En kovin tärkeänä
En ollenkaan tärkeänä

7. Halutessasi voit tarkentaa vastaustasi tähän:

8. Pidän suullisen kielitaidon arviointia lukiossa

Erittäin tärkeänä
Melko tärkeänä
En osaa sanoa
En kovin tärkeänä
En ollenkaan tärkeänä

8. Halutessasi voit tarkentaa vastaustasi tähän:

9. Lukion opetussuunnitelman arviointikriteerit suullisen kielitaidon osalta ovat mielestäni

Hyvin selkeät
Melko selkeät
En osaa sanoa
Melko epäselvät
Hyvin epäselvät

9. Halutessasi voit tarkentaa vastaustasi tähän:

10. Koen saaneeni riittävästi koulutusta suullisen kielitaidon opetukseen.

Täysin samaa mieltä
Jonkin verran samaa mieltä
En osaa sanoa
Jonkin verran eri mieltä
Täysin eri mieltä

10. Halutessasi voit tarkentaa vastaustasi tähän:

11. Koen saaneeni riittävästi koulutusta suullisen kielitaidon testaamiseen ja arviointiin.

Täysin samaa mieltä
Jonkin verran samaa mieltä
En osaa sanoa
Jonkin verran eri mieltä
Täysin eri mieltä

11. Halutessasi voit tarkentaa vastaustasi tähän:

12. Englannin ylioppilaskokeeseen tulisi lisätä suullisen kielitaidon koe.

Täysin samaa mieltä
Jonkin verran samaa mieltä
En osaa sanoa
Jonkin verran eri mieltä
Täysin eri mieltä

12. Halutessasi voit tarkentaa vastaustasi tähän:

13. Mikäli suullisen kielitaidon koe otetaan osaksi englannin ylioppilaskoetta, uskon sen vaikuttavan suullisen kielitaidon opetukseen ja arviointiin.

Täysin samaa mieltä
Jonkin verran samaa mieltä
En osaa sanoa
Jonkin verran eri mieltä
Täysin eri mieltä

13. Miten? (valinnainen)

14. Mikäli suullisen kielitaidon koe otetaan osaksi englannin ylioppilaskoetta, uskon sen vaikuttavan kirjallisen kielitaidon opetukseen ja arviointiin.

Täysin samaa mieltä
Jonkin verran samaa mieltä
En osaa sanoa
Jonkin verran eri mieltä

Täysin eri mieltä

14. Miten? (valinnainen)

15. Muut mahdolliset kommentit (esim. suullisen kielitaidon opetukseen ja arviointiin, englannin ylioppilaskokeeseen tai tähän kyselyyn liittyen):

Appendix B. Original data examples

- (1) Jokaisella oppitunnilla olisi hyvä olla ainakin yksi suullinen harjoitus, mutta aina aika ei siihen riitä.
- (2) Tekisimme enemmän, jos aikaa olisi enemmän.
- (3) Vaikka suullisia tehtäviä tehdään, osa opiskelijoista tekee ne varsin pintapuolisesti ja nopeasti.
- (4) Harjoittelumahdollisuuksia tarjotaan riittävästi. Osa opiskelijoista hyödyntää näitä mahdollisuuksia tehokkaasti, toiset eivät.
- (5) Arvioin osaamista joka tunti kierrellessäni luokassa ja pyrin antamaan mahdollisimman usein palautetta jokaiselle. Kurssiarvosanaan vaikuttavaa arviointia on vähemmän, mutta joku osuus joka kurssilla.
- (6) Ei numeraalista tai strukturoitua arviointia, pikemminkin aktiviteetin ja yrittämisen arviointia.
- (7) En tiennyt vastatako joka tunti vai en koskaan, koska virallista arviointia en tee, mutta opiskelijoiden kanssa keskustellessani teen mielessäni huomioita koko ajan.
- (8) Koska opiskelijoita on niin monta, on mahdotonta arvioida jokaista opiskelijaa edes joka viikko. Kiertelen kyllä kuuntelemassa keskusteluja ja lukemista, mutta yhdellä opettajalla ei mitenkään ole resursseja arvioida jokaista opiskelijaa kovinkaan usein.
- (9) Arvioin oppilaitten äänittämän ja palauttaman suullisen esityksen melkein kaikissa kursseissa.
- (10) Kurssiin kuuluu melkein aina joko palautettava video tai suullinen esitys luokan edessä, joka arvioidaan.
- (11) Vaikka vertaan suorituksia taitotasoasteikkoon, on vaikea päättää, kuinka sujuva tai luonnollinen opiskelijan suoritus loppujen lopuksi on ja mitä kriteereitä voisi painottaa. Sujuvuus, ääntäminen, intonaatio, ilmaisuvaramo jne.
- (12) Haastavaa on suullisen kielitaidon arvioinnissa se, että opiskelijan luonne vaikuttaa valtavasti esim. koetilanteessa siihen miten hän saa tuotettua kieltä. Ujo mutta

osaava opiskelija voisi todellisessa elämässä selviytyä paljon paremmin kuin jännittävässä koetilanteessa

- (13) Tosielämässä tärkein kielitaidon osa-alue. Puutteet vaikuttavat työnsaantiin ja vapaa-aikaan.
- (14) Opiskelijat ottavat sen tosissaan kun arvioidaan. Opetuskin silloin päämäärätietoisempaa. Antaa mahdollisuuden suullisesti taitaville nostaa numeroaan.
- (15) Tottakai opiskelijat ansaitsevat saada palautetta suullisesta kielitaidostaan, mutta ainainen arviointi ei välttämättä ole aina parhaaksi. Pääasia on, että tunneilla saavutetaan sellainen ilmapiiri jossa kaikki uskaltavat harjoitella suullisia taitoja.
- (16) Suullisen kielitaidon tulee olla osa arvosanaa kurssin painotuksen mukaan. Pidän kuitenkin säännöllistä harjoittelua ja harjaantumista arviointia tärkeämpänä.
- (17) Jos arviointi tarkoittaa arvosanan antamista, niin en kovinkaan tärkeänä, mutta jos se tarkoittaa muuta arviointia, niin yhtä tärkeänä kuin kaikkea muutakin arviointia.
- (18) En pidä arviointia ylipäänsä kovinkaan tärkeänä - opettaisin mielummin ilman arviointia.
- (19) Liiallinen arviointi pilaa viestintävalmiuksien kehittämisen, esitelmistä antavat vain vertaisarviointia.
- (20) Yhtä epäselvät kuin kaikki muutkin arviointikriteerit
- (21) En ole tähän asti nähnyt selkeää OPSia. Se on täynnä korulaiseita. Olen toki lukenut vaatimukset, mutta eivät ne ole mielessäni joka hetki tunnilla.
- (22) Suullisen kielitaidon kurssin osalta erittäin selkeät, mutta muuten erittäin epämääräiset. Miten painotetaan? Mikä prosenttimäärä? Millaista osaamista edellytetään missäkin vaiheessa? Tämä toisaalta on lukion kieltenopetuksen ongelma muutenkin, kun on määriteltä vain tavoitetaso. Tavoitetaso suhte kurssiarvosanoihin on jokaisen opettajan itse määriteltävissä. Käytännössä arviointi perustuu yleiseen tapaan, perinteeseen ja opettajan saamaan palautteeseen omasta arvioinnistaan yo-kirjoituksissa.
- (23) Opettamaan voi oppia vasta työssä.

- (24) Siihen liittyvää täydennyskoulutusta voisi olla enemmän tarjolla.
- (25) Viime vuosina täydennyskoulutus on painottanut digiloikkaa. Esimerkiksi väittelyn opettaminen on minusta haastavaa.
- (26) Yo-kokeen vaatimukset heijastuvat vahvasti varsinkin viimeisten kurssien opetukseen.
- (27) Se ryhdistyttäisi jokaisen opiskelijan motivaatiota suulliseen kielitaitoon.
- (28) Periaatteessa pitäisi olla, mutta käytännön järjestely tulee olemaan katastrofaalinen näillä opiskelijamassoilla.
- (29) Opetan myös IB-linjalla, jossa suullinen koe ollut aina osa loppukokeita. Sen valmistelu, nauhoittaminen, arviointi ja välittäminen jatko-arviointiin, on todella työläs prosessi. Miten tämä saataisiin toteutettua tuhansien yo-kokelaiden kanssa kuormittamatta opettajia kohtuuttomasti? Jo nyt englannin yo-koe on varsin työläs arvioida.
- (30) Tulisi lisätä koe, mutta pelkään kieliopettajien työmäärä ja myös sitä ettei saa siitä palkkaa.
- (31) Ensin on selvitettävä miten se tehtäisiin ja miten sen arviointi korvataan opettajille.
- (32) Nykyinen parin kanssa suoritettava suullinen koe (kurssi 8) on hyvä. Koneelle puhuessa jää pois luonteva interaktio.
- (33) Onko kaikkien mahdollista näyttää osaamisensa koneen kanssa keskustellessa, kun aito vuorovaikutus puuttuu.
- (34) Laitetaanko opiskelijat puhumaan itsekseen/koneen kanssa? Se taas ei palvele ollenkaan tarkoitustaan kielitaidon käyttämistä ihmisten välillä tapahtuvaan kommunikointiin.
- (35) Liian raskas arvioitavaksi.
- (36) Käytännön toteutus ja tasavertainen valtakunnallinen arviointi mietityttävät.
- (37) Jos opettajien pitää tehdä eritarkastus koulussa, pitää huomioida, että pienissä lukioissa on vain yksi opettaja > mistä 2. arvioija?

- (38) Nykytilanteessa en tiedä miten se voitaisiin toteuttaa. Jokaista suoritusta varten tulisi olla useampi arvioija.
- (39) Kuka arvostelee? Lähetetäänkö kaikki kokeet YTL:ään?
- (40) Toteutus ja varsinkin arviointi askarruttavat. Tietää vain lisätyötä, sillä suullisen kokeen arviointi on hidasta (jos vertaa esim. OPH:n testiin, joka on kestoaltaan 20 min).
- (41) Saisivatko kaikki täydennyskoulutusta arviointiin?
- (42) Jännittäminen vaikuttaa suulliseen suoritukseen. Miten sen vaikutus huomioidaan?
- (43) Saadaanko riittävän autenttinen tilanne, joka EI STRESSAA opiskelijaa?
- (44) Kaikkea ei tarvitse testata kokein, tai ainakaan ylioppilaskokein.
- (45) I think that section 2.2 would be sufficient enough as a way to evaluate their skills, where they write their responses to different questions, etc. [ENG]
- (46) En ymmärrä miten se olisi mahdollista järjestää, siksi olen täysin eri mieltä.
- (47) Teachers would have to devote more time to practicing these skills in the classroom. [ENG]
- (48) Arviointiin tulee kiinnittää huomiota myös pakollisilla kursseilla, ja antaa palautetta opiskelijoille.
- (49) Opiskelijat valitsisivat suullisen kurssin entistä useammin (nytkin reilusti yli puolet).
- (50) Ylioppilaskoe ohjaa aina opetusta, tälläkin kertaa.
- (51) Yo koe on edelleen se, joka ohjaa lukioden kaikkea toimintaa (ainakin meillä) ja tuntuu että konsensus opettajien keskuudessa on, että mikä ei siihen valmenna, on turhaa. Miksi välittää koko loppuelämään vaikuttavista taidoista, kun tärkeintäjän on saada opiskelijoille hyvä arvosana kompastuskiviä täynnä olevasta 6h kokeesta? Huoh...
- (52) Todennäköisesti suulliseen osioon harjoittelemisen tulee viemään aikaa kirjalliseen osioon harjoittelemiselta.

- (53) Tunteja on rajoitettu määrä. Jos jotain lisätään, toista vähennetään.
- (54) Tämä ei poistu, koska yksi lukion tehtävistä on antaa jatko-opintoihin riittävät valmiudet ja kirjallinen ilmaisu yliopistomaailmassa tietenkin on ja pysyy.
- (55) Suullisen kokeen ottaminen osaksi yo-koetta vaikuttaa ainakin omalta osaltani sen, että minun on ehkä pakko alkaa arvioida asiaa jo numeraalisestikin pakollisilla kursseilla. Mielestäni kielten opetuksessa on menty paljon eteenpäin siinä, että suullisuus on tullut opetukseen mukaan, mutta en ole varma siitä, paraneeko tilanne sillä, että sitä ruvetaan numeraalisesti arvioimaan jo kursseilla. Sillä voi olla negatiivinenkin vaikutus opiskelijoitten uskallukseen puhua vierasta kieltä.
- (56) Pääasiassa koen suullisen kielitaidon korostamisen erittäin hyväksi asiaksi. Opetuksessa se voisi näkyä enemmänkin. Yo-kokeeseen sen sijaan suullinen osio kuulostaa todella haastavalta toteuttaa (käytännön järjestelyt), en ole ollenkaan vakuuttunut myökään sen tarpeellisuudesta. Tarvitseeko kaikkea testata kokeilla? Eikö nykymalli (erillinen todistus suullisesta kielitaidosta ENA8-kurssin käyneille) toimisi myös jatkossa? Entä puheviat tai kielijännitys?
- (57) Suullista yo-koetta ei pitäisi arvioida kone vaan opettaja.
- (58) Olisi hyvä saada verrata omia arviointitaitoja esim. sensoreiden arviointiin.
- (59) Jos tulee YOhon, arviointikriteereiden on oltava selkeät, kertaluonteinen suullinen koe ei mielestäni ole sopiva kaikille opiskelijoille.
- (60) Suullisen kielitaidon testaus on haastavaa isoissa ryhmissä. Opettaja ei ehdi pienen suullisen tehtävän aikana kuunnella kaikkia (usein n. 35 opiskelijaa) ryhmäläisiään. Suullisella kurssilla tilanne on eri sillä ryhmäkokoo on max 20.
- (61) Minun mielestäni ena8, eli suullinen kurssi pitäisi tulla pakolliseksi kurssiksi, jos suullinen yo-koe toteutuu. Tällä hetkellä meidän koulussa ena8-kurssin valitsevat vain ne, jotka jo muutenkin ovat sujuvia suullisilta taidoiltaan. Muille kynns on arvioinnin takia korkea.
- (62) Opetushallituksen laatimat suullisen kielitaidon kokeet ovat todella eri tasoisia. On hieman eri asia keskustella lapsisotilaista kuin harrastuksista tai vaikkapa nuorten rahankäytöstä. Näin ollen kokeesta saadut arvosanatkaan eivät ole vertailukelpoisia.